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BY FLORENCE WARDEN



AUTHOR OF "THE HOUSE ON THE MARSH"



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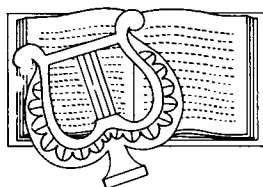
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SCHEHERAZADE :

A

LONDON NIGHT'S ENTERTAINMENT.

BY

FLORENCE WARDEN,

Author of

“THE HOUSE ON THE MARSH,” “A WOMAN’S FACE,”

“A PRINCE OF DARKNESS,” ETC.

NEW EDITION.

WARD AND DOWNEY, PUBLISHERS,
12, YORK STREET, COVENT GARDEN, LONDON.

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RICHARD CLAY & SONS, LIMITED,
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SCHEHERAZADE

A LONDON NIGHT'S ENTERTAINMENT.

CHAPTER I.

"HERE, shall we go three in a hansom?"

"Hansom be hanged! It's a lovely night. Let's walk."

"Massey is afraid the loved one will be there before him."

"Never fear! A beautiful woman was never yet kept waiting by an Irishman."

"Right ye are! And yet there are no men about better worth waiting for," retorted Clarence Massey, amid the laughter of his companions.

The speakers were three young subalterns, who had been dining in Fitzroy Square with an enthusiastic old soldier who had been a major in their regiment fifteen years before. On learning, three weeks ago, of the arrival of his old regiment at Hounslow, he had sent to all the officers an invitation to dinner, which had been accepted by the Colonel and by such of the rest as were disengaged on the evening named. Clarence Massey, a pale-faced, bright-witted little Irishman; "Dicky" Wood, a tall, thin, weedy-looking young fellow, renowned for the sweetness of his disposition; and George Lauriston, the best-looking man and most promising young soldier in the regiment, were on their way to finish the evening at different entertainments.

Lauriston was rather too well-conducted a young fellow to be altogether popular, having been brought up in Scotland,

and being too much occupied with his ambitions to shake off a certain amount of reserve and rigidity left by his early training. But, on the other hand, these qualities served to heighten the strong individuality of a character uncommon both in its strength and in its weakness, and to add to that subtle gift of prestige which is so capriciously bestowed by nature. So that now, as in the old time at Sandhurst, his comrades would rather be in his society than in that of companions with whom they had greater sympathy.

They had not gone many steps down Fitzroy Street, when Massey began to beguile the weary hours by singing snatches of the most amorous of Moore's melodies below his breath as he walked along. On being asked to desist, he reviled his companions for their insensibility to music and love, and there ensued a hot, if amicable, dispute both as to the justice of the accusation and the competence of the accuser. Dicky Wood took up the challenge on behalf of music, and Lauriston on that of love, and Massey grew more and more pert in his assertions that no Saxon could possibly do justice to either the one or the other.

"There's no warm blood in your veins," he maintained energetically. "Young or old, handsome or ugly, ye're all tame—tame as dormice, and ye haven't a chance with the Irish boys. For your passionate lover, your devoted husband, the ladies must come to us."

"How about the Colonel?" asked Dicky, in a voice louder than he intended; for, as he spoke, a figure some little distance ahead of them, on the other side of the street, stopped and turned.

"Talk of the d——!" said Lauriston, in a low voice.

Massey, much dismayed, looked ready to take refuge in flight.

"Let's go back and turn down the first street," he murmured, his brogue coming out strongly in his excitement. "There's a kind of court-martial look about his left eye that makes him a worse person to face than one's tailor at Christmas-time."

"Nonsense!" said Lauriston. "Don't be a fool, Massey. He's in an angelic temper this evening; and he's not half a bad fellow at any time."

"Not to you—you were born with a silver spoon in your mouth, and if you were to blow up an arsenal you would get off with a 'severe censure.' But I'm not so lucky."

However, he was persuaded to walk on ; and in the meantime the dreaded Colonel was crossing the street to meet the young men. He was a small spare man, who from the other side of the road looked insignificant, but who seemed to grow in height and importance as he came closer, until, when face to face with you, he had the dignity and imposing appearance of six feet two. A sabre-cut over his left eye had drawn up the eyebrow in a manner which gave an odd expression to his weather-beaten and prematurely old features, and imparted additional intensity to the gaze of a pair of piercing blue-gray eyes, which looked out from his thin, rugged face like the guns from a concealed battery. His expression, however, as he drew near the young men, was one of such mitigated ferocity as passed in him for amiability, and the grating tones of his voice were charged with as little harshness as the unmusical nature of the organ permitted.

"Who is that calling on the Colonel?" he asked, turning to keep pace with them in an unexpected and unwelcome access of sociability.

Colonel Lord Florencecourt was an Irishman, and his countryman, finding him in a softer mood than usual, plucked up his native audacity.

"They were running down love and the ladies, Colonel, and I was calling upon all true Irishmen to help me to support their cause."

The young lieutenant had recovered sufficiently from his fright to wing this speech with a little mischievous barb, for Lady Florencecourt was a notoriously undesirable helpmeet.

The Colonel laughed harshly.

"Support the cause of the ladies? Very like supporting the cause of the cannon-balls that come whizzing about your ears from the enemy's camp! While you are praising their velocity, and the directness of their flight, whir-r-r comes one through the air and stops your fool's tongue for ever."

The dry grimness with which he spoke set the young men laughing. But Massey, encouraged by perceiving that his chief was in good humour, began again softly to sing :

"Oh, say, wilt thou weep when they darken the fame
Of a life that for thee was resigned?"

"Not at all, my boy," broke in the Colonel, in his file-like voice ; "she will say : 'What a fool that boy was, and how tiresome he got at the last !' Nothing, believe me, wearies a woman so much as a *grande passion*. Trust me ; I once watched a friend through all the phases of one."

"Did he die, Colonel ?" asked Massey, in a small voice.

"No, but he had to take a very strong remedy. Well, now, lads, I don't want to impose a misogynist's society on you any longer, especially as I have small hopes of making any converts under five-and-twenty. Only take an old fellow's advice : Singe your wings at as many candles as possible, and you will run the less risk of being burnt to a cinder by any one of them. Good-night."

They raised their hats to him, and he hailed a passing hansom and drove off, just as they turned westward into one of the streets leading into Portland Place.

"He himself was the friend, I suppose," said Dicky, when they had commented on the Colonel's unusual sociability.

"The *grande passion* was certainly not for Lady F.," said Massey.

"By Jove, if she was the remedy, it *was* a strong one !" added Lauriston.

"I shall take his advice, and distribute my attentions more," remarked Massey, who was never in the society of any woman under fifty, of high or low degree, without devoting all his energies to ingratiating himself with her.

"Old buffers like that always talk in that strained fashion about the dangers of women, but as a matter of fact it isn't till you're over fifty yourself that they become dangerous at all."

"No," said Lauriston, with a *blasé* air pardonable at three-and-twenty. "Hang it all, the difficulty is, not to avoid their charms, but to find a girl decent-looking enough to dance with twice and take down to supper without being bored to death !"

"You don't find many *grandes passions* knockin' about nowadays," observed Dicky sagely.

"At least not in our set," amended Massey ; "nor in this country."

"Oh ! I suppose they're common enough over the Channel !"

"I won't say that, but there's something in the eye of an Irish girl that sets your heart beating nineteen to the dozen——"

"Provided it's an Irish heart."

"Provided it's nothing of the sort!" cried Massey hotly. "Provided it's any heart with warm red blood in it, and not brimstone and treacle!"

"Gentlemen, a little calmness, please," suggested Lauriston, who was being hustled off the pavement by the uneven walk and excited gesticulations of the disputants, "or it will come to vivisection in a minute to prove the correctness of your studies in anatomy."

However, the argument still went on, growing every moment more lively, until, both disputants turning to Lauriston as referee at the same time, they found that he had disappeared. The common wrong made them friends again at once.

"He's given us the slip," said Dicky.

"We'll pay him out for it," added Massey.

They were standing on the pavement of one of those shabby, ill-kept streets which intersect the busier, broader thoroughfares of this part of London. The noisy children, who played in the gutters during the day and turned their skipping-ropes across the flag-stones in the evening, had now gone to bed, and the stream of poor, struggling, obscure London life flowed by intermittently. A quiet, care-worn woman passed quickly, with her basket on her arm, counting up the pence she had left after her evening's bargaining; a few paces behind her came a couple of public-house loafers—pallid, vacuous, with flabby hats, and the slimy black coats a great deal too long for them, so much affected by this class; and then a line of loud-voiced, shrill-laughing girls, with dirty faces and Gainsborough hats o'er-shadowed by a plentiful crop of bedraggled feathers.

Not a tempting neighbourhood this by any means, nor one in which two dashing hussars of one or two and twenty could expect to pick up desirable acquaintances, or to take a deep interest in their unknown brethren; and yet the eyes of these two young soldiers had fallen there upon a sight fascinating enough to make them forget the mean flight of their companion, and to ignore the smell of fried fish, the hoarse cry of the costermonger at the corner of the street, even the occasional contact of a greasy elbow.

A low iron railing stood out from the wall of the house by which they had stopped, fencing off a third of the pavement. It was a house with a large, arched double-door, an imitation, on a modest scale, of the more imposing entrances of the dwellings in adjacent Portland Place ; a house that had evidently seen better days, and still held its head higher than most of its neighbours. To the left of the door were three bells, placed the one above the other ; over the lowest of these was a small brass plate, with this inscription in red letters, " Rahas and Fanah ; " while between the two windows of the ground-floor hung a board with the same names painted on it, and underneath the words, " Oriental Merchants." These lower windows were so begrimed with dust and soot that they imparted a film of occidental unloveliness to the oriental merchandise within. Rows of engraved brass bowls and vases, of curious design, and without the rich golden glow which, in the magnificent and expensive Eastern bazaars of Regent Street, suggests the popularising touch of Birmingham ; hanging lamps of metal and glass, of strange and clumsy shapes, lovely only to the initiated ; a long, graceful, and unserviceable-looking gun, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, inviting you to believe it came fresh from the hands of an Arab sheikh—all these, against a background of Turkish tables, Indian plaster figures, hookahs, and strange weapons, formed an odd collection which, veiled by the murky dimness of ostentatiously dirty window-panes, and railed off three feet from the reckless errand-boy, had no attraction whatever for the denizens of Mary Street.

Now Clarence Massey and Dicky Wood were not Oriental enthusiasts. They had been educated up to toleration of Japanese screens, and to a soulless and calm admiration of the colours of Japanese plates. So much their girl cousins, their partners at balls had done for them ; but they had soared no higher, and hanging lamps, unless of coloured glass profusely ornamented with beads, had little meaning for them. Yet there they stood spellbound, staring into the mysteriously obscure little Oriental warehouse, as if it had been an Aladdin's palace of quaint splendours. For the little picture had human interest. A small lamp, not of ancient Asiatic, but of modern European pattern, was set on the narrow mantelpiece in a space cleared for it amid brass trays and Indian pottery, and by its light the young men could see, seated at a table close under the dismantled fire-

place, a dark-faced man whose head was covered by a scarlet fez. Behind him stood a girl attractive enough to rivet the attention, not alone of a couple of susceptible young hussars, but of an army of veterans. From her head hung veil-fashion over her shoulders a long piece of thin, yellowish, undyed silk, kept in its place by a fillet of gold, from which dangled a row of tiny sequins that glittered and shone on the peeping fringe of black hair that overshadowed the upper part of a little face that looked dusky against the shining silk. A strip of gold-intersected gauze, worn as a yashmak, covered, but scarcely concealed her breast and the lower part of her young face, showing row upon row of many-coloured beads around her neck, and gleaming, regular teeth between open lips, that were, perhaps, somewhat too flexible and somewhat too full. She stood there motionless for a few moments, evidently unseen by the man at the table, and brimming over with hardly contained girlish merriment. The young men watched, fascinated, unwilling to acknowledge to themselves that this little scene, passing in what was after all a public shop crammed with wares piled high to attract all comers, was part of a strictly domestic drama into which it was not their business to pry.

"Why doesn't she look up? I can swear she has deuced fine eyes!" murmured Massey, who was getting much excited.

Dicky nudged his friend impatiently into silence, feeling that speech destroyed the spell, and awoke unwelcome recollections of the ordinary rules of social life which they were bluntly ignoring. In one moment they would walk on certainly. In the meantime, Dicky thrust his arm through that of his friend, and turned slowly round as a preliminary movement, keeping his eyes, however, still fixed upon the veiled houri. She remained immovable for a moment, and then from under the pale folds of rough silk appeared two slender arms of an ivory tint, several shades lighter than that of her face. They were bare to the shoulder, laden with massive bracelets, some silver, some silver-gilt, that stood out like cables round the soft flesh, or glittered with sparkling pendants of the precious metal: as, her face alight with girlish gaiety, she slowly advanced her small, lithe, olive-tinted hands, with the fingers curved ready to close upon the young man's eyes, a couple of bracelets slid down her left arm with a little clash, which, though

inaudible to the two spectators outside the window, was evidently the means of announcing her presence to her companion. He started up, and, turning round, seized her wrists as she attempted to spring, laughing, away from him. She was now so far back in the room that Massey and Dicky Wood caught only a vague, indistinct glimpse of long folds of soft white stuff under the silken veil, and of a crimson sash bound loosely round the hips of the little figure that crouched, laughing, against the wall. But they saw the eyes, such long, roguish, languishing eyes, that Massey felt that what heart his small and early loves had left to him was gone again, while even the more self-contained Dicky felt an odd and unaccustomed sensation, which he was afterwards unromantic enough to compare to a premonitory symptom of sea-sickness.

At that moment, however, the girl suddenly caught sight of the faces outside, and directed her companion's attention to the window. As he turned abruptly, drew back into himself with a sudden expression of reserved and haughty indignation, and approached the window to draw down the blind, the girl, with a ringing laugh of mischief, which even the lads outside could hear, took advantage of his momentary retreat to escape.

The two young men, on finding they were discovered, walked on at once with involuntary and guilty haste, without at first speaking. Massey broke the silence with a deep sigh, and stepping into the road, hunted out the name of the street and entered it in his pocket-book.

"No 36, Mary Street," he murmured devoutly.

"You will dare to show your face here again then?"

"My face! I mean to show more than my face next time. I shall go boldly in and buy up the shop."

"Always supposing the fire-worshipping gentleman with the fez does not recognise you and try some pretty little Eastern practical joke upon you, such as inducing you to spend a couple of hours head downwards in the water-butt, or nailing you up in one of his own packing-cases. Oriental husbands have got a nasty name, you know."

"Husbands! That lovely girl is never the wife of a man with a face like old brown Windsor! Or if she is, he has so many others that he can't have time to look after them all. If I only knew her *number*, that when I call I might inquire for the right one!"

"You'd better give it up, Massey ; Indian dishes are proverbially hot ones," said Dicky warningly.

But the young Irishman was too much excited to listen to anything but the suggestions of his own imagination concerning the lady.

"I don't believe she's Indian," he rambled on ; "I never saw a type quite like it. The face is too delicate for a Creole ; I wonder if she's an Arabian. She looks like a princess out of the *Arabian Nights*, now doesn't she ?"

"Yes, perhaps she does. And you had better remember all that means before you set about stealing a march on the genie. Little cunning, sensual creatures with the mind and manners of cats—"

"I tell you who she is like," pursued Massey, ignoring interruptions, "she is Scheherazade. You remember, the sultan's wife who tells the stories, and fascinates him into sparing her life, after he'd sworn to kill all his wives on discovering what a faithless lot they were."

"And then the story breaks off without letting one know whether she turned out any better than the rest. Wise chronicler, he knew where to stop ! And if you're wise, you'll follow his example, and leave the tale where it is at present."

But that was asking too much. The very next day, Massey rang boldly at the bell of Rahas and Fanah, Oriental merchants, and spent two or three pounds on trumpery brass pots and pans and on ill-made plaster animals, purposely choosing small articles that he might fritter away his time the more slowly, and in fact hang about on the chance of another sight of the Eastern beauty. He was served by the man he had seen the evening before, a genuine Oriental with grave, composed, leisurely manners. Massey longed to put some question to him which should lead to the discovery whether he was married, but this was not easy, as the Oriental merchant's black eyes had an expression which suggested that he was not to be trifled with ; "a sort of creepy, crafty, stick-you-through-with-a-chopstick-and-serve-you-up-with-chilis look," as he afterwards described it to Dicky. However, he elicited the information that the dark-visaged one came from Smyrna, which did not help him much, as the only thing he recollected to have heard about that place was that :

"There was a young person of Smyrna, whose grandmother threatened to burn her."

He came out crestfallen after a stay of an hour and a quarter, but had his drooping spirits raised by running against Dicky Wood as he turned into Portland Place.

"Hallo, where are you going to?" "Hallo, where are you coming from?" said they at the same moment.

They both had grown red, and presently began to laugh as the truth came out. Scheherazade, whatever names you might call her, had a captivating presence which absolutely demanded to be seen again.

The ardour of those two young men for Indian art-products grew hotter and hotter as the week wore on, and their alternate pilgrimages to Mary Street resulted in nothing but the accumulation of a vast hoard of lacquered and engraved articles which not even the most indiscriminate present-giving could keep within due bounds. The senior partner in the firm, a small gentleman, leather-coloured and lean, with a grey beard and a white turban, had indeed turned up and induced suggestions that the mysterious lady might be his daughter, and glimpses had been caught of a lean, withered, white-robed ayah, who could by no means be mistaken for the interesting fair one; but it was not until the ninth day after their first visit that Massey was able, with great excitement, to announce that, on paying a late evening visit to Mary Street, he had seen the mysterious fair one disappearing helter-skelter up the staircase, and heard her close sharply, not to say bang, a door on the first floor.

"She had bare feet in loose sandals—feet you would have given ten years of your life to be walked upon by," continued Massey rapidly, "with anklets that jingled as she went up. Old brown Windsor hustled her off as I came in—I'm afraid he must be her husband; and yet—I don't know. Wonder if one could get lodgings in that house; it's let out in floors, I know."

"Not to us; they'd know what we were up to," said Dicky gloomily. "I believe both of those beggars suspect us already. They're only waiting for us to have spent our last half-crown on narghils that we can't smoke and cotton-wool beetles, and then they'll politely bow us out and snigger to themselves over our greenness. We've been making fools of ourselves, Massey; I shouldn't wonder if she was a decoy, a made-up old thing, very likely, the mother of old brown Windsor, henna'd and dyed and

veiled till she looked beautiful at a distance, but a regular mummy at less than twelve paces."

"What, would ye slander beauty herself? Is nothing sacred to you? Look here, I've got an idea. You know how jolly quick Mr. George Lauriston shuts us both up if we venture to have an opinion of our own about anything—female beauty for instance?"

"He has been putting on a little too much side lately, certainly."

"I tell you that young man wants taking down. You know how he sneered the other night at mess when we said we'd discovered a new beauty?"

"Yes, he did. Well?"

"Well, we'll make him see her and judge for himself and satisfy our curiosity at the same time."

"What are you up to now?"

"I tell Mr. George Lauriston my brother has taken rooms at 36, Mary Street; I ask him to call. I tell him to go straight in, upstairs to the first floor, and that the first door is my brother's. He won't find him naturally, because he will not be there; so he'll inevitably see the lady, and we'll pump him afterwards, as to what she looked like, what she said, how she spoke."

"Massey, you're off your head. There'd be a deuce of a row. Scheherazade would scream, brown Windsor would draw his scimitar, there'd be a scrimmage on the stairs, and what would happen to you and me when Lauriston got back would be better imagined than described."

"By Jove, if I could find out who she is I'd think it cheap at a black eye."

"I shouldn't."

Dicky being the weaker if the wiser, however, gave way in the end, and George Lauriston duly received and accepted the invitation to call at 36, Mary Street, on a certain evening to see Massey's brother, a clever and rising engineer, whom Lauriston had met and was anxious to meet again.

As the day of the appointment drew near, both of the conspirators, who had grown more lax in their attendance at the Oriental warehouse as repeated disappointments told upon their energy, felt qualms as to Lauriston's action when he should have discovered the trick played upon him; and at last Massey told Dicky that he had an invitation up the

river which would take him out of town on the evening named, and Dicky confessed in reply that he had got leave to go down to Brighton that afternoon.

"It will be just as much fun to hear what he says afterwards as it would be to watch him go in from the little shop on the other side of the way, as we proposed," said Massey.

"And he'll have cooled down a bit before he sees us, so that if anything comes of it he won't be able to rush off red-hot and do for us," added Dicky, more honestly. "I suppose old brown Windsor won't stick him with a yataghan, or anything of that sort if he really does meet the lady," he continued in a low and lugubrious voice. "You see, I'm sure the black men guess what we're after, spending all our time and money over tea-trays and idols as we've done lately. And it would be rather hard if they were to think poor Lauriston was in it, only cheekier than the rest of us, and were to make him into a curry for what we've done."

"Pooh, nonsense, Lauriston can take care of himself as well as anybody. He isn't much of a soldier if he won't think a back-hander over the staircase a small enough price to pay for the sight of a houri handsome enough for a Sultan's harem."

"But, Massey, he's half a Scotchman. He wouldn't look twice at a woman who hadn't raw bones and red hair, and not at her if she wasn't well provided with the bawbees," suggested Dicky in the pride of his knowledge of different phases of human nature.

"All the better for us then ; he'll think it's a mistake and won't guess what we've been up to."

So the guilty pair went their ways and left their consciences behind them.

CHAPTER II.

IF there were in the wide world a good-looking, stalwart young man of twenty-three for whom an unexpected meeting in romantic and picturesque circumstances with a beautiful woman could be expected to be without danger, George Lauriston might well have been the man.

Not that he was a prig ; not that the highly inflammable substance, a soldier's heart, was in his case consuming for some other lady. But he was not quite in the position, and not at all in the mind of the majority of his comrades of his own age. He was the poor son of a brilliant but unlucky soldier who had died bravely in his first campaign ; and he was so eaten up with the ambition to distinguish himself, and to render famous the name which his father had already made honourable, that all other passions merely simmered in him while that one boiled and seethed on the fires of an intense and ardent nature that as yet had shown but little of its powers. That he had a keen intellect was well known ; it shone out of his brown eyes, and gave interest to a face, the chief characteristic of which was a certain, frank, boyish brightness. A good face, an honest face ; none but the better qualities of the nature it illustrated showing through it yet, no sensual curves to spoil the firm lines of the mouth, which, for the rest, was more than half hidden by a moustache some shades lighter than the brown hair, which had a very pretty hero-like curl about the temples. To the rare eyes which read more than superficial signs in a man's countenance, there might perhaps have been something suggestive in the fact, unnoticeable to any but the very keenest observer, and therefore unknown even by most of his intimate friends, that the two sides of his face did not exactly correspond in a single feature. One nostril was somewhat larger and higher

than the other ; the left corner of the mouth scarcely level with the right ; and the same with the eyes and eyebrows, the difference being in all cases very slight but none the less real. It might have been argued with some point that a man whose face showed these irregularities was just as likely to be guilty of startling inconsistencies as a man with a heavy jaw is to turn out a brute, or one with a receding chin to prove a soft and yielding fool. So far, however, George Lauriston could boast a fair record, having earned his universally high character as much by the heartiness and spirit with which he threw himself into all games and sports, as by the energy and devotion he showed in the discharge of the various duties of his career.

Like most men of strong natures, he enjoyed more prestige than popularity among his equals in age and rank, being looked upon by the weaklings with secret contempt for his temperate and orderly life, and by the superior sort with a little unacknowledged fear. For these latter had an inkling that there was something under the crest, whether boiling lava or a mere bed of harmless, quiescent pebbles who should say? It was only the old officers in the regiment, as it had been only the more experienced masters at college, who could discern of what stuff this bright-eyed young soldier was made, and knew that the fire within him, which could never find enough food for its devouring energy, was a spark of the flame that, fanned by the breeze of blessed opportunity, makes men heroes. Love, except in its most fleeting forms, he had not yet felt, and did not, for the present at least, mean to feel : it would come to him at the proper time, like other good things, in some glorified form, and not, as it had come to his father, in the shape of a romantic devotion to a pretty but foolish woman who had been a clog and a burden as long as her short life lasted. With a well-defined ideal in his mind, and with all thoughts of pleasure in the present swallowed up by dreams of distinction in the future, he found all women charming, but none irresistible. Many of the girls he knew were handsome enough to please a fastidious taste, some had an amusing vivacity, some a fascinating innocence, here and there was one with the rarer attraction of sweet and gentle manners ; but the beauties were vain and spoilt, the simple ones inane or ill-dressed, and one had doubts about the heart of the wits, and the head of the soft and silent ones. So

that George Lauriston had never yet been brought face to face with the alternative of vain longing for a woman he could not get, or marriage on £200 a year. In such a situation, he had often avowed what course he would take: "Marry her and have done with it," was his brief formula. He was of a nature too independent and self-sufficing to be very strongly influenced by the varying outside circumstances of his life or by the more lax and easy-going principles of his common-place companions; therefore the views inculcated by his old Scotch aunt of a woman as a sacred thing, and of love and marriage as concerns in which a Divine providence took an extra and special interest, still remained in his mind, though of course somewhat clouded by the haze of experience. It follows that his opinions on conjugal loyalty were even aggressively strong.

On one occasion, when a young married officer of the regiment—a harmless creature enough, but with a youthful ambition to be thought "fast"—was vapouring away at mess about his achievements with the girls, Lauriston broke in, in a deep voice:

"Nonsense, laddie, everybody knows you can't tear yourself away from your little wife. And do you think we should think better of you if you could?"

With these well-known principles and opinions, his more susceptible young comrades, Massey and Dicky Wood, were justified in not considering that they were exposing Lauriston to any danger of the heart, in plotting his encounter with the dusky little wife of a foreign shopkeeper.

It was nine o'clock on the evening appointed by the conspirators when Lauriston, after dining at the "Criterion" with a friend, drove up in a hansom to number 36, Mary Street.

It was dull, wet, and rather cold—the fag end of one of those dismal days that so often mar the brightness of the season in an English May. Seen through the damp drizzle in the darkness which was already closing in, as if night were jealous of the gloom of day, and were hurrying to push her out of the field, the street looked dirtier and shabbier than ever, and Lauriston wondered to himself how Frank Massey could have taken rooms in such a wretched neighbourhood. He did not recognise it as the street in which he had slipped away from his friends on the night of the dinner-party in Fitzroy Square; but seeing the number

36 on the door, and observing that a light was burning in two of the three windows on the first floor, he paid the cabman, and, according to his instructions, turned the handle of the door, and walked in. There was a modest and economical light over the door, which threw small and weak rays over a bare, wide, and dingy hall, papered with a greasy and smoke-dyed imitation of a marble, which exists only in the imagination of the more old-fashioned order of wall-paper designers. The ceiling was blackened and smoke-hung, the deep wainscoting and the wood of the once handsome banisters were worn and worm-eaten, the wide stairs had only a narrow strip of cheap oilcloth up the middle, scarcely reaching to the now ill-polished space on either side. On the left hand were two doors, framed in oak with a little carving at the top; between the panels of both these doors a small white card was nailed, with the words "Rahas and Fanah, Oriental Merchants." Only one chair—a substantial, elaborately carved old hall chair, which looked like a relic of some sale at a nobleman's house, but on which errand boys' pocket-knives had now for some years exercised their uninspired art carvings—broke up the monotony of the bare walls; and a well-used doormat lay at the foot of the stairs. There was no other attempt at furnishing, but against a door at the end of the passage by the staircase a huge stack of packing-cases marked with foreign characters were piled almost to the ceiling, and gave forth a scent of mouldy straw to complete the attractions of the entrance-hall.

"Rum place to hang out in!" he murmured, as he put his first foot on the creaking stairs. "Number 36, Mary Street—yes, that was certainly the address."

On the first landing things looked a little more promising. There was a carpet, and outside each of the three doors a small, black skin rug, while against the wall, on a bracket of dark wood, with a looking-glass let in the back, there burned a lamp with a pink glass shade.

Lauriston knocked at the door which he judged to be that of the room in the windows of which he had seen a light.

There was no answer, and there was no sound.

He waited a few moments, and then knocked again—a sounding rat-tat-tat with the handle of his umbrella, such as none but a deaf person or a person fast asleep could fail to

hear. Again no answer ; again no sound. He tried the other two doors with the same result ; then, much puzzled by this reception, he went back to the first door, and after a third fruitless knock, turned the handle and peeped in. Nothing but black darkness in the two inches he allowed himself to see. He opened the next door. Although the blind was down and there was no light inside, he could see quite clearly that it was a small room with nobody in it. Now, as this apartment looked on to the street, it was evident that the lights he had seen in the windows must be those of the room into which he had first peeped, as the two doors were on a line with each other.

"There must be a double door," he said to himself, and going back again, he opened the first door wide and found, not indeed the obstacle he had expected, but a heavy curtain, thick as a carpet, which might well be supposed to deaden all outer sounds.

He drew this back, and in a moment became conscious of an intoxicating change from the gloom and the drizzle outside. A faint, sweet perfume, like the smell of a burning fir-forest, a soft, many-tinted subdued light, the gentle splash-plash of falling water all became manifest to his senses at the same moment, and filled him with bewilderment and surprise. In front of him, at the distance of three or four feet, was a high screen of fine sandal-wood lattice work, over which was flung a dark curtain, embroidered thickly with golden lilies. Through the interstices of the aromatic wood were seen the glimmer of quaint brass lamps, the flashing of gold and silver embroideries, the soft green of large-leaved plants.

Lauriston knew he must have made some awful mistake ; no young English engineer would go in for this sort of thing. But his curiosity was so great concerning the inhabitants of this Eastern palace on a first floor in Mary Street, that he was unable to resist the temptation of a further peep into the interior. He stepped forward and looked behind the screen.

It was a large room. No inch of the flooring was to be seen, for it was covered with thick carpets and the unlined skins of beasts. The fireplace and the entire walls were hidden by shining silks and soft muslins, draped so loosely that they shimmered in the draught of the open door. At the four corners of the room stood clusters of broad-leaved

tropical plants, round the bases of which were piled small metal shields, glittering yataghans, long yellowish elephant-tusks, and quaintly-shaped vessels of many-hued pottery ; above the dark foliage spears and lances were piled against the wall, pressing back the graceful draperies into their places, and shooting up, straight and glistening, like clumps of tall reeds. The ceiling was painted like a night sky—deep dark blue, with fleecy grayish clouds ; from it hung, at irregular intervals, innumerable tiny opalescent lamps, in each of which glowed a little spark of light. Besides this, a large lamp of brass and tinted glass hung suspended from two crossed silken cords nearly in the middle of the room, and immediately under it a small fountain played in a bronze basin.

Round three sides of the room was a low divan, covered with loosely thrown rugs and cushions, some of sombre-hued tapestry, some resplendent with gorgeous embroidery.

The whole of this most unexpected scene formed only a hazy and harmonious background in George Lauriston's eyes ; for in front of him on the divan, between the two trellised windows, lay a creature so bewitchingly unlike anything of flesh and blood he had ever seen or dreamed of, that the young Englishman felt his brain swim, and held his breath with a great fear lest the dazzling vision before him should melt away, with the scents and the soft lights and the rustle of the night air in the hanging draperies, into the drizzling rain and the damp and the darkness of the street outside.

It was a woman he saw, a small and slender woman, lying almost at full length, supported by a sliding pile of cushions, the one on which her head rested being a huge square of gold-tinted satin, with peacocks' feathers stitched down in all directions upon the smooth silk. Below her on the ground was a little inlaid Turkish table, on which burnt, in rather dangerous proximity to the lady's light draperies, an open lamp. A loose but clinging garment of soft white stuff hid her figure and yet disclosed its outlines, the graceful curves from shoulder to hip, and from hip to heel, while the tip of an embroidered velvet slipper peeped out beneath its folds, and a slender rounded arm, laden from shoulder to wrist with armlets and bracelets, gold, silver and enamelled, escaping from its loose open sleeve, hung down straight over the side of the divan, and looked in the soft

light which fell on it from the lamp, like purest ivory seen in the last rays of a sunset. Long gold and silver chains which, had she been erect, would have reached below her waist, hung round her neck and jingled together over the side of the couch. A great soft scarf of many skilfully blended colours was bound about her waist and fastened by a large Indian ornament of roughly hewn precious stones. The robe she wore had become disarranged by her reclining posture, so that great folds of the soft white muslin had gathered about her neck, forming a white-nest-like frame for her small head, which was covered by a tiny scarlet velvet cap, from under which her short and curly black hair escaped in a tangled bush that cast a shade over a little white face. Her eyes were closed and a most ghastly livid pallor was spread over her features from forehead to chin; so that Lauriston, with a great shock, was awakened out of the state of moonstruck bewilderment and admiration into which the strange sight had thrown him, by a horrible belief that he was standing in the presence of a dead woman.

"Great Heaven!" broke from his stammering lips as he made one quick step forward.

But at the sound of his voice the sleeping girl awoke; and her opening eyes falling at once upon a stranger, she sprang into a sitting position with a startled cry. In a moment he saw what had caused his mistake. A blue glass in one side of the octagonal lantern above had thrown a livid light on the young girl's face, which he now saw to be healthily flushed with sleep, and animated with the most vivid alarm.

He was retreating hastily with a confused murmur of apologies for his intrusion, when a bright glare of flame flashed up blindingly in a pointed tongue of light and smoke towards the ceiling, and with a shriek the girl started to her feet. The hanging open sleeve of her white gown had caught fire as, waking like a child and not yet quite mistress of all her faculties, she had, in her change of position, allowed the flimsy light material to swing over the little lamp. Lauriston's light overcoat hung on his arm. He wrapped it round the panting, struggling, moaning girl, swept up with his left hand a leopard skin that was uppermost amongst the rugs at his feet, and binding that also tightly about her, succeeded in very few moments in stifling the flame. He

had said nothing all the while, there being no time for discussion ; the girl, after the first cry, had submitted, with only low murmurs of fright and pain, to his quick and vigorous treatment. He looked down, when she at last fell merely to sighing and trembling and gasping for breath, at the curly head from which the little scarlet cap had fallen in his rough embrace. The thick touse of hair, soft, not as silk, but as finest wool, was entirely innocent of curling tongs, and hung in disorder about a face which had something more of passion, something more of a most innocent voluptuousness in every curve and in every glance than are ever to be found in the countenance of an English girl.

Lauriston still held the little creature tightly in his arms, and as he did so the feelings of pity and anxiety, which had been the first to stir in his heart when his prompt measures choked down the rising flame, gave place to an impulse of tenderness as she looked up with long, soft, shining, black eyes full of wondering inquiry. This small helpless thing, quivering and sighing in his arms and gazing with the velvet, innocent eyes of a fawn into his face, made his heart leap ; with an agitation new and strange, he pressed her close to him, and clasped her head against his breast.

If it had been indeed a fawn that he had been caressing, he could not have been more amazed and confused when the girl slipped lithely through his arms, and shaking off the impromptu bandages in which he had swathed her, tossed the ends of her long scarf over her burnt and blistered left arm and the blackened rags of her sleeve and bodice, and said haughtily, in English as good as his own, and moreover with the accent of perfect refinement :

“I am much obliged to you, sir, for your kind help ; but as you are a complete stranger to me, I shall be glad if you will either give an explanation of your visit, or bring it to a close !”

The unexpected dignity and self-possession of this young creature, who could not be more than sixteen, together with the shock of discovering that the fantastic and dreamy-eyed being whom he had been treating somewhat in the free-and-easy fashion of the *Arabian Nights* was a mere nineteenth century young English lady, reduced poor Lauriston to a level of abject consternation. And yet, against her will, there was something in her indignation more alluring than repellent ; even as he stammered out the first words of a

humble apology, the transient gleam of anger faded out of her long eyes, and he saw only before him a graceful tiny creature, calling forth his pity by the pain in her arm which made her wince and bite her under lip, and passionate yearning admiration by the seductive charm of every attitude and every movement.

"I beg you to forgive my intrusion, madam. This address was given to me, by mistake, as that of one of my friends. I can't describe to you the distress I feel at my share in your accident. Tell me how to summon your friends; I will go at once, and send a doctor. Please forgive me; for heaven's sake, forgive me."

White wet beads stood on his forehead; he was in an agony as, the danger past, she evidently felt more and more acutely the smarting pain of her injured arm and shoulder. She gave way, as her plaintive eyes met those of the young soldier, and burst into tears.

"There's no one here. Mrs. Ellis has gone out; Sundran, my servant, is in bed, and I won't—won't let Rahas come. I'm afraid of him; I hate him, I hate him." And she stamped her little velvet-shod foot, that came softly enough down on the pile of disordered rugs. "Oh, send some one to me—it does hurt so."

"I will! I will!" he said hastily. And afraid of the emotion which was choking his voice and causing his own eyes to overflow, he dashed out of the room and down the stairs.

At the foot of them he came suddenly, with a great start, face to face with a tall, gaunt, dark-visaged man, who seemed to spring up like a magician from out of the gloom without sound or warning. He wore an Oriental dress of loose trousers, jacket and sash of a deep crimson, and a fez on his black hair; but there was no trace of likeness, no trace of a similarity of race, between the ivory skin and long liquid eyes of the girl Lauriston had just left, and the swarthy complexion and fierce, lowering expression of this man.

"What are you doing here?" he said fluently enough, but with a strong foreign accent, clutching at the young man's coat with long lean fingers.

Lauriston, without replying, flung him aside so deftly as well as forcibly that the other staggered and reeled back against the wall, and the young soldier dashed open the door and was out of the house in a moment. Addressing

the first respectable-looking man he met in the street as he hastened in the direction of Fitzroy Square, he asked the address of the nearest doctor's, and a few moments later was at the door of the house indicated. He hurried the doctor up as if it had been a case of life or death, and burned with impatience because that gentleman's footsteps were more deliberate than his own. For there was more in his heart than anxiety that the tender little arm should be quickly eased of its pain. The forbidding face of the man he had met on his way out haunted him, and filled him with a sullen rage, the origin of which he did not clearly understand. He was the "Rahas" the girl had wished to avoid; Lauriston felt sure of that: and he was alone, excited with indignation against the strange intruder, in the house with the injured girl. He would go up stairs to her, furious, full of savage inquiries. What claim had he upon her? What would he do to her?

Lauriston was in a fever of doubts and questions and tempestuous impulses utterly foreign to him. An odd fancy would recur again and again to his mind in this new tumult of thoughts and feelings.

She—the lovely, lissom creature whom he had held in his arms, whose heart he had felt for a short moment beating against his own, was the fascinating if somewhat soulless lady of the Eastern tales; he—the dark-faced, evil-looking being whose eyes and teeth had gleamed out upon him menacingly in the darkness, was the wicked genie who held her in his power.

Well, and if so, what part in the tale was he, George Lauriston, to play?

Within one short hour, the self-contained, ambitious young man seemed to have changed his nature. The absurd, frivolous, or perhaps dangerous question had become one of momentous importance to him.

CHAPTER III.

WHEN George Lauriston arrived with the doctor at the door of 36, Mary Street, the lights in the windows on the first floor had grown dimmer, and George, who would have opened the door as he had done before, and gone up stairs with the doctor without ceremony, found that the key had been turned and the bolts drawn. He rang the bell, and made the knocker sound with a loud rata-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-tat that echoed through the now quiet street. No notice whatever was taken of this, except by a gentleman who lodged on the third-floor front opposite, who threw open his window and wanted to know in a husky voice what the things unutterable they meant by kicking up such an adjective-left-to-the-imagination row in a respectable neighbourhood.

But No. 36, Mary Street remained as silent and unresponsive as ever.

After a pause Lauriston knocked again, regardless of the growing strength of the maledictions of the gentleman opposite. Then a shadow was seen against the curtains of one of the first-floor windows, and over the carved lattice-work a head looked out. George moved closer to the door, and left the doctor to speak.

"Who is it knocking?"

"It is I, Dr. Bannerman. I have been sent for to attend a young lady who has been severely burned, and if the door is not opened immediately I shall return to my house."

"Are you alone?"

"Say yes. I'll go," said Lauriston in a low tone.

"Alone? Yes."

The head disappeared, and Lauriston went a little distance down the street and crossed to the other side. He

saw the door of No. 36 cautiously opened upon the chain, and then, after a few impatient words from the doctor, it was thrown wide by the man in the fez, and shut as the other entered. The young man walked up and down impatiently, never letting the house go out of sight until, after about half an hour, the doctor re-appeared, and the clank of the chain was heard as the door was bolted again behind him.

"Well!" said Lauriston eagerly.

"Well!" said the doctor easily.

A doctor is the last sort of man to be readily astonished; but it was hardly possible that the oldest priest of the body should find himself in attendance on the entrancing mistress of an Eastern palace on the first floor of a lodging-house in Mary Street without a mild sense of passing through an unusual experience.

"You—you saw her?" continued the young man, breathlessly.

"Yes, and dressed the arm. Nothing at all serious; nothing to alarm anybody. She won't be able to wear short sleeves for some time, and that's about the worst of it."

"Unimpressive logs these doctors are," thought Lauriston, perceiving that his marvellous Eastern lady, with all her romance-stirring surroundings, had awakened in the man of science absolutely no more interest than he would have felt in a butcher who had broken his leg. The only thing to be noted in his quiet, intelligent countenance was a deep and curious scrutiny of the face of his young companion.

"You are not a friend of long standing of this lady's, I understand?" he said, after an unobtrusive but careful examination.

"Oh, no; it was by the merest accident I was in the house at all. I was given that address by mistake as that of one of my friends. Why do you ask?"

"It is nothing, nothing. Your manner when you came to me was so strangely excited—in fact, it is so still—that I could not help thinking what a difference thirty years make in a man's view of things."

"I was thinking something of the same sort. You seem to see nothing new, interesting or strange in a patient who appears to me to be the mysterious Rosamond in a labyrinth of extraordinary circumstances."

"I admit I cannot see anything extraordinary in the cir-

cumstances ; moreover, I marvel at the strength of an imagination which is able to do so."

"Will you tell me just what you did inside that house, and just what you saw?"

"Certainly. I was admitted, as you know, by a tall dark man who, by his dress and complexion, I should judge to be either an Arab or a North African."

"Don't you think it strange that no attention was paid to my first knock, and that you were admitted with as many precautions as a policeman in a thieves' kitchen?"

"That was all explained to me by the young man himself, who seemed to be a very intelligent fellow."

"How? What did he say?"

"He said that a lady who lodged in the house with her governess and chaperon, and who, he gave me to understand, was shortly to become his wife——"

"His wife!" interrupted Lauriston, with a rush of blood to his head.

"—had been frightened by an utter stranger who had by some means got into the house, and forcing himself into the presence of the young lady, who was asleep during the temporary absence of her companion, had woke her and caused her, in her alarmed attempt to escape, to set on fire the thin muslin wrapper she was wearing. Is not this substantially correct?" asked the doctor calmly.

"Yes; but——"

"It seemed to me quite natural that our Arabian or African friend should look upon the unexpected visit as something like an intrusion, especially as the stranger, on leaving the house, flung the aggrieved *fiancé* headlong over the staircase of his own dwelling."

"*Fiancé!* How do you know he is her *fiancé*? You have only his word for it."

"It did not occur to me to ask for the lady's," said the doctor drily.

"Well, but the room, the lamps and the spears and the tapestries! Her dress too! Do you have many patients dressed like that?"

Dr. Bannerman looked at him again. If he had seen nothing to surprise him in his patient, he saw much in his questioner.

"Her dress? Let me see; she had on a white muslin

wrapper with one sleeve burnt off. No, I saw nothing astonishing in that. Her governess, a rigidly dignified Englishwoman, was with her."

"And the furniture of the room——"

"Was the usual furniture of a back bedroom in the better class of London apartments."

"Oh." A pause. Lauriston looked half relieved, half puzzled.

He did not want to think that the little section of an enchanted palace, in which he had passed through such a brief but exciting experience of something altogether new and intoxicating in life, was the mere vision that his calmer reason began already to tell him it must be.

"You didn't go into the front room then?"

"No."

Lauriston felt better.

"But I could see into it, and there was nothing extraordinary in it."

"It was the other room," murmured Lauriston.

"Well, we are at the corner of my street, and I will wish you good-night. We professional men have to keep early hours when we can."

"Shall you call there again?"

"Possibly. But, if you will take an old man's advice, you will not."

"You will tell me why?"

"I will. I saw nothing of the marvellous sights you appear to have witnessed, but I saw something which you did not, or at least not in the same way. That little black-haired girl's eyes are the eyes of a woman who is born to be a coquette—perhaps something more; and who can no more help looking up into the eyes of every man she meets with a look that draws out his soul and his senses and leaves him a mere automaton to be moved by her as she pleases than fire can help burning, or the spider help spinning his thread."

"I will never believe it. You may have had thirty years' more experience than I; but, by Jove, where a woman is concerned, one man's guess is as good as another's. And I am quite as firmly convinced that the child is an innocent and good little girl as you are that she is the contrary. I know it, I am sure of it; as I held her in my arms——"

"Ah!" interrupted the doctor,

"Wrapping my coat about her to put out the flames," continued Lauriston hastily, "I looked at her face, and was quite touched by its helpless, childlike expression of innocence."

"And will it take my thirty years of extra experience to teach you that to hold a woman in your arms is not a judicial attitude?"

Lauriston was silent. Emboldened by the knowledge that the doctor did not even know his name, and was by no means likely to meet him again, he had allowed himself to talk more freely than he would otherwise have done to a stranger. In the ferment of emotions he was in, however, the older man's drily cynical tone seemed to him satanic. He was by this time, therefore, quite as anxious to leave the doctor, as the latter could possibly be to get rid of him. He was raising his hat for a rather reserved and abrupt leave-taking, when Dr. Bannerman stopped him with a good-humoured touch on his arm.

"Now what have I done that you should give me my dismissal like that? Merely told you what your own good sense—for you're a Scotchman I know by your accent, though it's far enough from a canny Scot you've been to-night—will tell you in the morning. Set your affections on a blue-eyed lassie among the hills, or on a prim little English miss; she may not be quite so warm to you as a little southern baggage would be, but then she'll be colder to other people, and that restores the balance to your advantage. Now, I shall probably never see you again, so we may as well part good friends; and for goodness' sake (the doctor said something stronger than this) "for goodness' sake think over my advice. It's ten times better than any physic I ever prescribed."

He held out his hand, which Lauriston shook warmly.

"Thank you, doctor. I'm not a Scotchman, though I was brought up among the heather. You're right. Your prescription is a very good one, and I'll take as much of the dose as—as I can swallow."

And in a moment he was striding down the street.

When he woke up the next morning, George Lauriston felt like a small boy who has been well thrashed the night before and who, sleeping soundly after an exhausting burst of grief, can't for the life of him remember, for the first moment, the nature of the load of affliction which still

burdens his little soul. Had he had more champagne the night before than was strictly necessary to support existence? Or had he been plucked in an exam.?

The sight of his over-coat lying on a chair, with the lining blackened and burnt, recalled the adventures of the preceding evening. But they came back to his mind in a hazy sort of way, nothing very clear but that odd little figure in white, with the slender arms, and the long black eyes, and the chains and bracelets that jingled and glittered as she moved. It was an odd incident certainly, and not the least odd part of it was the seriousness with which the old doctor had warned him to have nothing more to do with the mysterious lady of the sandal-wood screens and skin-covered couch. Nothing was less likely than that he should: in cold blood and in the healthy and prosaic atmosphere of morning, Lauriston felt not the slightest wish to run possible melodramatic dangers in the endeavour to see again the beautiful little girl whose romantic surroundings had afforded him an hour's excitement the night before. The burn she had so unluckily sustained through no fault of his, had been pronounced not serious; if he were to attempt even a civil call for inquiries, he would probably be ill received in the house as a person whose presence had already brought more harm than good.

Therefore George Lauriston, who was deeply interested in a war-game which was being played that day, treated the subject as dismissed, not without some shame at the absurd pitch of excitement to which this meeting with a presumably low-bred woman had for a short time raised him. He retained nevertheless just sufficient interest in the little episode, or perhaps just enough shyness about his own share in it, to say nothing whatever upon the subject to Massey or Dicky Wood, neither of whom had the courage to question him. The blunder—for he never suspected a plot—might remain unexplained. And the conspirators, not guessing what a brilliant success they had had, decided that the train had been laid in vain.

But accident—Lauriston was the last person in the world to call it fate—threw him within a fortnight again in the way of the mysterious lady. He was returning one afternoon from Fitzroy Square, after a call at the house of the old officer whose dinner-party had indirectly led to the adventure, when by pure accident he found himself in Mary Street, opposite to the very house where his mysterious intro-

duction had taken place. He retained a vivid enough recollection of all the circumstances to feel a strange shock, half pleasure, half a vague terror, when the red-lettered inscription "Rahas and Fanah, Oriental Merchants," with the star and crescent underneath, caught his eye. He stopped involuntarily, and glanced up at the windows. Nothing in the daylight appearance of the house gave any indication of the luxurious glories within. The blinds of the two windows in which the lights had shone on the evening of his startling visit were half drawn down, and there was no sign of the carved lattice-work which he remembered so clearly. The third window on the first-floor was open, and while he looked the curtain—not a gorgeous hanging of bullion-embroidered tapestry, but the common white lace curtain of commerce—moved, and the black curly head of a young girl appeared at the window. It was the mysterious lady of the lamps.

Although seen thus in the strong afternoon sunlight, apparently dressed like an ordinary English girl in a silk dress that was a sort of green shot with pale grey, she produced an entirely different impression on him from that of his first sight of her, the charm of the warm-tinted skin and the glowing eyes was as great for him as ever. He raised his hat, and she beckoned to him with a coquettish and mischievous little curve of her tiny fore-finger under her chin. He felt his heart leap up, and though, when she whirled round and disappeared from the window, he tried to walk on, telling himself vehemently that he should be worse than a fool to yield to the magnetic attraction this dark-skinned elf seemed to exercise upon him, he relaxed his speed, trying to assure himself that it was too hot to race along like a postman. But at the creaking of a door in the street behind him he was obliged to look back, and there, peeping out like a tiny enchantress in this dingy London wilderness of dirty, screaming children, costers with their barrows, the public-house loafer and the catsmeat man, stood the girl, laughing at him, and inviting him with bewitching eyes and dazzling teeth, her head bent downwards to avoid the blaze of the sun, which shone full on her head and on the little ivory hand which she held up against her dusky soft black hair as a most inadequate screen.

George Lauriston hesitated. If he had foreseen in continuing this acquaintance merely a flirtation with a pretty and somewhat forward girl, all his ascetic principles and

resolutions would have had to give way under the strong admiration she had excited in him. But the strange circumstances of his first meeting with her which, though they had been thrust into the background of his mind by the absorbing interest of his deep-seated ambition, now again appealed to his imagination with great force; the advice of the old doctor, and perhaps a suggestion of that sacred instinct which the lower animals listen to and live by, all tended to warn him from a danger more than ephemeral, and at the same time to throw over the acquaintance an extraordinary glamour of romantic attraction.

The girl apparently guessed his reluctance, which she was not without means to overcome. Advancing a step further in the doorway, and leaning forward so that her slight grey-and-green-clad figure was visible almost to the waist, she pointed to her left arm, which hung in a picturesque sling of soft orange Indian silk. This gesture was irresistible. He felt that it justified his immediate and hasty return. How could he excuse his boorish conduct in not calling before to ask after the little arm that had been injured through him?

The lady, however, was in forgiving mood. She drew back into the doorway as soon as she saw that her end was gained, and when he reached it she was leaning against the old carved oak banisters, waiting for him, all smiles and laughter.

"Yes, come in," she whispered, putting her finger to her lips and glancing at the inner door on her right hand.

Again Lauriston thought reluctantly of the *Arabian Nights*, and the lady kept in a cage by the tyrannical genie, but it was too late to retreat now, even if he could have found strength to resist the spell of the dancing eyes, or the dumb eloquence of the wounded arm. She sprang forward as soon as he had entered and shut the door softly. It was cool in the bare hall after the heat of the streets. The girl's dress was a simple robe of silk, with lights and shades of grey changing into green, made something after the fashion of the so-called æsthetic gowns he had aforetime abhorred, but falling in straight crisp folds instead of clinging to her like damp rags, as did the garments of crumpled South Kensington devotees a few years ago.

She mounted two steps and turned, holding the banister-rail and leaning on it.

"I thought you would have come before," she said with a first touch of shyness, looking down upon her hand with a most coquettish air of being quite ready to look up again if she were invited to do so.

"I didn't dare," said Lauriston at the foot of the stairs, "I was so ashamed of the mischief I had done."

"You might have called to ask if I had got better."

"What would Mr. Rahas have said?"

"Rahas!" A great flood of crimson blood mounted to her face, glowed in her cheeks, and heightened the brilliancy of her eyes, which flashed a liquid light of haughty indignation from china-blue white and velvet-brown iris. "Rahas! What right has he to speak? He has no claim in the world upon me!"

Evidently the impetuous little lady and the despised Rahas, whatever their relation to each other might be, had been expressing a mutual difference of opinion. The Englishman watched with equal measure of admiration and astonishment the rise of the sudden wave of passion which seemed almost incredibly strong for such a small creature to sustain. She was struck in the midst of her anger by the expression of his face.

"What are you laughing at?"

"I did not mean to laugh. I was wondering to see you so angry."

The girl smiled, quite restored to good humour.

"Ah, yes, they used to say that when I was at school. English girls"—with a flash of contempt—"can't be angry or sorry or happy or anything; they can only eat and drink and sleep and wrangle and giggle."

"You are not English then?"

"I English! You did not think I was English the other night?"

"No."

"What did you think I was?"

"A little fairy princess."

"But when my sleeve caught fire, and you took me in your arms and put it out; you did not think I was a fairy then?"

"No," said Lauriston, stupefied by the daring of her childish coquetry.

"Well, what did you think I was then?"

"A poor little creature in danger through my blundering."

"And what did you think of me when I said: 'Away; leave my presence?'" asked she, imitating the stately tone and attitude she had used.

"I thought you a very dignified young lady."

"You did not think me unkind?" with anxiety.

"Certainly not."

"Oh!" A pause. "I am very glad you did not think me unkind."

She looked down for a few moments, and played with the tiny bow at the top of her injured arm's silken sling. "You see," she went on earnestly, "when Rahas came up stairs he said you had flung him on one side, and I said you were perfectly right, and he was then very disagreeable. And Mrs. Ellis, my governess, came in, and they both said they did not believe what you said, and you would never dare to show your face here again. And I said"—the girl drew herself up like a queen as she repeated her own words—"Do you think that I, the daughter of an English gentleman, do not know the signs by which to tell an English gentleman?" He will come back to ask my pardon for the accident, to learn if it was serious. That is what I said," she continued, dropping her majestic manner, "and so I have watched for you; oh, how I have watched for you! You see, I was anxious, for my credit's sake, that you should not long delay." The last words were uttered in a demure tone, an afterthought evidently.

"I have been very busy," murmured Lauriston, trying guiltily to look like a Cabinet minister on the eve of a dissolution. "I really couldn't get away before."

"Of course not, or you would have come," said she simply. "And I suppose you did not like to come in because you did not know my people. But you will come up stairs now and know my governess, and she will see that all I have said about you is true. Please follow me. I forgot that it was discourteous to keep you waiting here."

She was like a child playing a dozen different parts in half an hour. Now, with the manner of a chamberlain, she led the way up stairs and ushered Lauriston into the smaller sitting-room into which on the night of his unexpected visit he had only peeped.

CHAPTER IV

AT the table was sitting a matronly lady in black, with a stodgy and inexpressive face. She was writing letters at a neat little morocco desk ; and on the entrance of her pupil followed by a good-looking but perfectly unknown gentleman, she drew herself up from her occupation, and rubbed her nose with her ivory-handled pen in evident dismay.

"Dear me!" she ejaculated softly, in tones of abject consternation, "who has she picked up now?"

Before the elder lady had time to give any other indication of the manner in which she intended to receive the stranger, the young girl flung her uninjured arm from behind round the neck of her less impulsive fellow-woman, and cried :

"Mammy Ellis, you see—you see I was right. This is the gentleman who saved me from being burnt. He has come to say he is sorry."

And with this introduction, uttered in a tone of the utmost triumph, she made a step back, as if she expected that a full and uninterrupted view of him would remove all lingering doubts as to the perfect eligibility of her new acquaintance.

It was rather embarrassing certainly. For the elderly lady, who had risen from her chair and was taking a good look at the midnight intruder, continued to glare at him with cold British stolidity, and Lauriston had none of the *aplomb* given by a long and varied course of flirtations.

"I am afraid, madam," he began humbly, and with a good deal of hesitation, "that you—that you will not forgive my—er—my appearance here, I mean my last appearance, in fact my first appearance." He paused to gather an idea to go on with, and continued his explanation more calmly, taking care, with all the signs of conscious guilt, to avoid the lady's stony eye. "A comrade of mine (his name is

Massey—we are lieutenants in the same regiment, ——th Hussars) gave me the address ‘36, Mary Street, West,’ as that of his brother, who is an old friend of mine. He told me to go right in and up to the first floor. Of course I must have come to the wrong Mary Street, but I knew of no other, drove straight here, and carrying out my instructions, had the misfortune, as you know, to intrude upon this young lady, with the unhappy consequence of waking her and causing the accident. I cannot express my regret. I have been ashamed to call. I would bring my friend to back me up if I thought you would believe him more than me. But you would not. I am a gentleman, madam, an officer. I hope you will believe me.”

Whether the eloquence of this speech would have been strong enough to melt the rigid lady is unknown. But there is magic to feminine ears in the word “officer”; and as the young fellow brought his explanation to an end with much brusque fervour, she softened visibly, and glanced from him to her charge in a wavering and uncertain manner.

“Well, really I don’t know,” she began vaguely, when the girl cut her short, slipping her slim hand between her guardian’s plump arm and matronly figure, and resting her head, gently tilted back, on the lady’s breast in wheedling and seductive fashion.

“Yes, yes, you do know, Mammy Ellis, you know your own husband was an officer—you’re always telling us so, and you’re only being dignified for fun, and you must shake hands with this gentleman and thank him for saving your little Nouna from having her arm burnt off.”

Thus adjured, Mrs. Ellis, still doubtfully murmuring and of rather distressful visage, did end by holding out a crumby hand, which George Lauriston shook with reverence and gratitude. He had got his cue now, and he at once made respectful inquiries about the husband, was fortunate enough to be able to tell the widow certain details concerning the regiment to which he had belonged, and soon succeeded in obtaining the lady’s confidence to such an extent that she entertained him with a long and minute account of the late officer’s distinguished though bloodless services to his country, and of the niggardliness of an ungrateful government to the hero’s family.

George was becomingly overwhelmed with indignation,

though the monotony of the narrator's delivery, the pleasant atmosphere of the half-darkened room, the window of which was shaded with thick blinds, and the sight of Miss Nouna stretched comfortably in an American well-cushioned chair, waving a palm-leaf lazily to keep the flies off, and looking at him half shyly, half mischievously from behind it through long black eyelashes, all tended to lull him into a drowsy state, in which he half imagined himself to be in some tropical country where passions spring up in a day to a fervour never felt in foggy England, where life flows on without energy or effort, and where woman, instead of being the modest partner of our joys and sorrows, is the passionate, voluptuous and irresponsible source of them.

The apartment, though far smaller, more commonplace and less gorgeous than the room which he had seen on his first visit, helped the illusion. Tall narrow glasses from floor to ceiling on each side of the door, reflected a long, two-tiered stand full of large-leaved hothouse plants which ran the whole length of the windowed-wall of the room. Half-a-dozen of these plants were little orange trees, their round yellow fruit giving pretty touches of colour to the dark green mass, while the white blossoms gave forth a faint, sweet perfume. The glass over the mantelpiece was draped with dark tapestry curtains, caught up here and there on each side by palm-leaf and peacock fans, of the kind with which a freak of fashion has lately made us all familiar. The curtains came down to the ground, while the deep valance which hung from the mantelpiece over the empty fireplace was caught up in the middle by a bronze statuette of a Hindoo girl, whose right arm held high above her head a shaded lamp. A pair of black Persian kittens were curled up asleep on a cushion at the feet of the statue. A harp stood in one corner, and a guitar lay on a chair. The rest of the room did not harmonise with these fantastic arrangements. The best had been done to conceal a bilious "high art" carpet by means of handsome rugs, and the table was beautified by an embroidered cover; but the chairs and side-board breathed forth legends of no more interesting locality than the Tottenham Court Road, and the walls were made hideous by an obtrusive and yet melancholy paper.

George Lauriston noted all these things, and his curiosity about this queer little household grew more intense. Who

was this fascinating young girl? Why was she living in this dingy corner of London with the garrulous middle-aged lady who must evidently find her impulsive charge "a handful"? The buzz of Mrs. Ellis's tedious monologue began at last to madden him, and he followed the young girl with eager eyes as she slid off her chair and rang the bell.

"I'm thirsty, Mammy Ellis," she explained. Then, tired of silence, she swooped down upon the table, thrust the pen her governess had been using again into the astonished lady's hand and said, coaxingly but imperatively: "Write—write to mamma. This gentleman does not wish to interrupt you. I will entertain him. Tell her what you think of him. And then I will read the letter, and see if it may go."

Mrs. Ellis laughed gently, and obeyed with a protest. Evidently that was the usual order of things between them. Nouna improvised herself a low seat beside the plants by piling on the floor the cushions from her American chair, then she crossed her hands round one knee, and looked up at Lauriston.

"You have not told us your name," said she diffidently.

"Nouna," protested the lady from the table.

"Don't you want to tell us your name?"

"Certainly. George Lauriston."

"That is a pretty name. Mine is Nouna."

"Nouna! That is not an English name."

"Of course not. It is an Indian name. Do you like Indians?"

"I have only known one West Indian lady."

"*West* Indian! That is not Indian at all. I come from the land of the Rajahs. My grandmother was a Maharanee. She was the most beautiful woman in all India, and she wore chains of diamonds round her neck that flashed and sparkled like a thousand suns, and she lived in a marble palace that was called the Palace of Palms, where the floors glittered with gold, and soft music came like wind through the halls, and a great tall tower with a minaret and a spire rose up into the sky over the room where she slept, to tell all the world that there was the spot where the Lady of the Seven Stars was resting. And she had a thousand slaves who knelt and bowed themselves to the earth when she spoke to them, and her palanquin was all of ebony-wood inlaid with pearl, and it was hung with silver fringe, and the

inside was satin the colour of the opening roses ; and she travelled on an elephant whose trappings were of gold. Ah, that is the beautiful land ; where the sun is scorching hot on the fields, and shines bright and glorious, and throws golden darts through the chinks of the blinds. And yet there the ladies of high rank—like my grandmother and my mother and I, lie still and cool in their apartments, or step down soft-footed into their marble baths where no hot glare can reach them, only the sense that it is warm and bright outside. Oh, that is the place to live in, to be happy in. How could my mother leave it to come to a land like this !”

She had worked herself up as she sang the praises of her own country to a pitch of glowing excitement, which changed suddenly to an almost heartbroken wail with her last words. Mrs. Ellis looked up from the table reprovingly.

“ You forget, Nouna, that India is a heathen country, and that your grandmother probably never had the chance of seeing so much as a single missionary, and seems to have been very ignorant of her higher duties.”

“ There are no duties out there,” sighed Nouna, with a most plaintive look into the dream-distance from her black eyes ; “ at least for the high-caste women. You have only to live, and love, and grow old, and die, and nothing to learn but what you breathe in from the flowers and the sweet scents, and love-songs to please your lord the prince.”

Mrs. Ellis looked scandalised.

“ Dear me, Nouna,” she bleated out nervously, “ you really don’t know what you are talking about. You never talked like this before. I don’t know what Mr. Lauriston will think !”

Mr. Lauriston thought the look of passionate yearning in the young eyes inexpressibly fascinating, but he did not say so, merely murmuring something about the allowance to be made for a tropical temperament. And, Nouna being reduced by the interruption to a silent trance of regret, the conversation became an intermittent duologue between the other two until tea was brought in. The manner in which this was served displayed the same inconsistencies as the furniture of the room. Sundran, Nouna’s ayah, in her native dress, placed upon the table an ordinary black and battered tray, on which stood a chased silver-gilt tea-service of quaint design, cups, saucers, and plates of a common English pattern, and

tiny silver-gilt tea-spoons with heart-shaped bowls and delicately enamelled dark-blue handles. A great water-melon lay among vine-leaves in a shallow silver dish.

Mrs. Ellis laid aside her writing materials and poured out the tea, but she could not forget the young girl's alarming outburst.

"I'm sure, Nouna, I don't know what the Countess would say if she could hear you, so very particular as she is about your religious education. I am afraid I have given way to you too much ; I ought never to have let Mr. Rahas fit up that room for you ; it fills your head with all sorts of heathen notions, not fit for a Christian young English lady."

"Mamma always lets me have my Indian things about me, and sends me Indian dresses, and she said herself I might have just one room without the horrid stiff European chairs and tables," said Nouna, her voice taking a particularly sweet and tender inflection at the word "Mamma." "But I'm going to give it up ; I've told Mr. Rahas I don't want it, and I've pulled down half the things. I will not accept gifts from one I despise."

Springing in a moment from languor into life, she put her cup down on the table and went to the door.

"Come and see what I have done," said she, beckoning to the young Englishman, her eyes dancing with mischief.

"Really, Nouna, I must say you are very ungrateful," said Mrs. Ellis in despairing tones. "Mr. Rahas is always most considerate and gentlemanly, and when you said you longed for an Indian room he put it so prettily, asking whether he might fit up one large sitting-room as a show-room for his things ; and then never showing anybody up into it ! I really think you ought——"

But Nouna had flown out of the room, and she was haranguing only Lauriston, who had risen obediently at the young girl's imperious gesture, but did not like to leave the elder lady alone so unceremoniously.

"She is a wilful little thing," he said smiling.

"Oh, Mr. Lauriston, what we English people call wilfulness is lamb-like docility compared to that girl's ! She's like an eel, like quicksilver, like a will-o-the-wisp."

"Or a sunbeam," suggested he.

"Ah, of course, you're a young man, you think her charming ; and so, I believe, at the bottom of my heart, do I. But give me a good, sensible, solid, matter-of-fact English

girl to look after, rather than this creature who is shaking with passion one moment, flashing her teeth, stamping her foot ; and the next suffocating you, and crushing up your bonnet with kisses. As if kisses could cure the headaches her wild fits give me, or as if you could squeeze resentment out of a person, as you do water out of a sponge !”

“Has she been in your charge long ?”

“Ever since she left school, six months ago,” said Mrs. Ellis with a sigh. “Her mother, one of the kindest and most charming women I have ever met, with all the high-bred ease that nothing will give to Nouna, wished her to have finishing lessons in music and dancing and languages in London. Music !” ejaculated the poor lady in a contemptuous manner. “Nothing would ever induce her to learn the piano, as every well-educated English girl should do. At school, after her first lesson, she crept down stairs at night, and undid all the strings of the instrument ; so that had to be given up. I believe she wanted to learn the tom-tom, or some hideous Indian thing with jam-pot covers at each end, and they had to compromise by teaching her the harp and the guitar. Then languages ! They only managed to get her to study French by telling her it was one of the dialects of India. As to dancing, that came to her like magic, from a waltz to a kind of wild dance of her own, more like the leaps and bounds of a young animal than the decorous movements of a young lady ! I dare not think what the Countess would say if she could see her.”

“Why doesn’t she live with her mother, then, who would surely have more influence over her than any one ?”

“You must not blame the Countess,” said Mrs. Ellis, as if he had been guilty of blasphemy. “A more loving mother never lived. You should read the beautiful letters she writes to her daughter. But she has married again ; and her husband, the Conde di Valdestillas, a Spanish nobleman much older than herself, is a great invalid, and she is obliged to travel about with him wherever he fancies to go.”

“But surely the daughter ought to be considered as well as the husband.”

“The Countess feels that ; and next year, when her daughter’s education will be finished, she intends settling down either in London or in Paris, and introducing the young lady to the world. If I can only keep the girl out of

serious mischief so long," sighed the lady, who seemed delighted to have a confidant; "but really it is too trying. The first thing we do after we have left the school (I was a boarder there, and as Nouna had taken a fancy to me, the Countess requested me to undertake the duties of *chaperon*) and come to London to look for apartments, is to pass this house on the way from Paddington to the Countess's lawyers, from whom I draw my salary and Nouna's allowance. There is a card—'Apartments, furnished'—in one of the first-floor windows. Nouna catches sight of the Oriental names on the board outside, sees Indian lamps in the windows down stairs, and nothing will satisfy her but to come back to this house and settle here. Then, of course, the younger gentleman, Mr. Rahas, falls in love with her and——"

At this point Mrs. Ellis was interrupted by the flinging open of the door, and Nouna re-appeared, her face distorted with anger, and her eyes flashing with contempt: like an enraged empress she held open the door, keeping her head at a very haughty angle, and disdaining to look at the visitor.

"I know that nothing I can show my guest can have any interest for him," she said icily; "but yet I think it would have been more courteous to me to disguise that fact."

She made one step towards her American chair, when Lauriston, with an amused glance at Mrs. Ellis which he might well suppose to be unseen, hastened to the door, and held it open for her with a bow.

"I beg your pardon," said he humbly, "I am very much interested in whatever you like to show me. But you left the room so suddenly that, before a clumsy man could hope to get up to you, you disappeared like a wave of the sea."

She looked up at him with a very intelligent and searching expression, and was sufficiently mollified to lead the way out, turning sharply just in time to catch an exchange of glances, amused on the one side, apologetic on the other, between the visitor and her guardian.

She affected not to notice this, however, but opened the door of the next room without speaking, lifted the heavy curtain, ushered him in, and then shut the door and drew the hanging close. Lauriston looked about him in astonishment. The thick blinds, which were plain canvas on the outer, and rose-colour and gold puckered silk on the inner

side, were drawn down, and made the room very dark, except for the chinks of sunlight that crept in at the sides. But there was quite enough light left to show what a wreck had been made of the luxurious beauty of the apartment since the night when it had burst on his eyes like a vision of fairyland. The silk and muslin hangings had been half torn from the walls, showing the ugly paper underneath; the spears and weapons had been tossed down on the ground as if they were so much firewood; the sandalwood screen had been folded and pushed into a corner; while of the smaller ornaments—cushions, daggers, Moorish table—a great pile had been made in the middle of the floor, and covered up with the tiger skins turned inside out. Nothing but the plants was respected; she had not had the heart to hurt them. Lauriston could scarcely help laughing; but when he glanced at the girl, and saw that she was standing against the dismantled wall, leaning back with an expression of as much triumph as if she had sacked a city, he felt really rather shocked, and clearing his throat he shook his head at her gravely.

"I did it all," she said, nodding proudly and glancing round, as if anxious that no detail of the noble work should escape him. "Rahas said that Englishmen were cads, that you were a cad, and so I pulled the things down. Yes, I saw you and Mrs. Ellis laughing at each other, as if I were a silly little thing, and couldn't do anything; but you see I can."

It was harder than ever not either to burst out laughing, or to catch her and kiss her like a spoilt child; but Lauriston resisted both temptations, and said seriously:

"I think it was very silly and very ungrateful of you."

She brought her head down to a less aggressive angle, and stared at him in surprise. He quite expected another outburst of anger, but none came. She only said "Oh!" reflectively in a soft undertone.

"He has been very kind to you, has he not, this Rahas?"

"Ye—es, he has been kind," slowly, thoughtfully, and reluctantly. "He wants"—she laughed shyly—"to marry me!"

"Oh!" Lauriston was disconcerted. A sudden flash of jealousy, acute and unmistakable, flamed up in his heart at the intelligence, communicated with this provoking

coquetry. "You are going to marry him then?" he said rashly, on the impulse of the moment, unable to hide from her sharp eyes an expression of pique.

By quite impalpable changes of tone and attitude, she grew upon the instant a hundred times more seductive, more bewitching.

"Marry him!" She moved her hand to her head languidly. "I don't know. One ought to marry the person one loves best—in England, ought one not?"

"Certainly," assented Lauriston, wondering at the power this mere child possessed of moving him, an altogether unsusceptible mortal, as he flattered himself, to impulses of passion.

"Then I must wait a little longer and be sure," she said, twisting her head upon her neck with the daring, instinctive coquetry of a girl of five.

"You would rather have a—a—an Oriental like this Rahas, wouldn't you?" he said in a low voice, his tone bearing more meaning than he wished.

"I don't know," she said, and stooping, she picked up a string of beads from among the *débris* on the floor.

He had come a step nearer to her, and as she stooped, by accident or design—with such a coquette one could not say which—she stumbled upon a rug and fell forward against him. He seized her with a gasp, and held her as she looked up with a laughing, provoking, irresistible face. She felt him shiver as he withdrew from her with such suddenness that she, leaning upon his arm, almost staggered.

"What is the matter?" she asked, as he drew out his watch with fingers so unsteady that he detached the chain.

"I—I beg your pardon," he stammered, "but I have a most desperately important appointment with—with my colonel, in fact, which I shall miss if I don't fly in the most unceremonious manner."

Her face changed. A glow, not of anger, but of passionate disappointment, flushed her face, and the tears welled up into her eyes. Lauriston grew very hot, and, all in a fever of excitement, wondered at this.

"When will you come again?" she asked breathlessly, raising her beautiful face with parted red lips. "You will not come again. Ah, I know you, you cold Englishman, you will forget me, forget the poor little girl whom you saw in flames. Oh, no; you must not!" With another

passionate change, her face grew tender and caressing, as she cooed out the pleading words like music to his unwilling ears. "Promise you will come again within a week. No, no, a promise won't do," as Lauriston, glad to be let off so easily, opened his mouth. "Swear, swear that you will come here again—within a week."

"But—"

"You shall not go till you have sworn."

The little tigress, with one spring towards the door, locked it and drew out the key; with another, she had reached the nearest window.

"No, no, don't. I swear!" cried Lauriston, who saw with stupefaction that she had raised the blind, and was about to throw the key from the open window.

She turned round, tossed the key in the air, and caught it in her hand with a laugh of triumph.

"Now," she said, "I know you must come. For an English gentleman always keeps his word."

She raised the curtain before the door, and put the key in the lock; before she turned it she twisted herself back towards the young fellow and said:

"Kiss me!"

He could not hesitate. If she would flirt it was not his fault. He put his arm round the lithe, bending waist, and pressed a passionate kiss on her red lips.

"Now I know you will come again," she whispered as she let him out.

When Lauriston had taken a decorous leave of the innocent guardian in the next room, and found himself once more in the street, he was inclined to think that he had changed his identity. Some new power, horrible in its strength, seemed to have fastened upon him, and to twist and turn him like an osier. He walked on quickly and firmly, trying to recall his old, calmer self.

"I will keep my oath and go there again," he said to himself with clenched teeth. "But by all I hold sacred, I won't see that demon-girl again. Heaven help the man who may ever trust his happiness in her hands!"

CHAPTER V.

It was not so easy, after this second interview with the mysterious lady of Mary Street, for George Lauriston to keep the image of the little black-eyed enchantress out of his mind. Her prompt and passionate advances to himself raised strong doubts as to the result of the education which Mrs. Ellis declared to have been so careful, while on the other hand, against his better judgment, he would fain have believed that it was the romantic circumstances of their strangely made acquaintance which had broken down, for the first time, the maidenly reserve of the passionate and wayward girl. In spite of himself, a small, slim, supple form, dark sun-warm complexion, April changing moods, kisses from fresh young lips that clung to your own with frank, passionate enjoyment, had all become attributes of his ideal of womanhood. It came upon him with a shock therefore, when, a few days later, he suddenly discovered that he was expected to find his ideal in a lady who was destitute of any one of them.

It came about in this way. Chief among the houses where George Lauriston was always sure of a welcome was the town establishment of Sir Henry Millard, Lady Florencecourt's brother, an uninteresting and rather incapable gentleman who had raised himself from poverty and obscurity by marrying, or rather letting himself be married by, an American heiress who was the possessor of a quite incalculable number of dollars. They had three daughters, Cicely, Charlotte, and Ella, all of whom would be well dowered, and who were therefore surfeited with attentions which custom had taught them to rate at their proper value. Lady Millard was a lean, restless, bright-eyed little woman, who had acquired some repose of manner

only by putting the strongest constraint upon herself, and who was consumed by an ardent ambition to be the mother-in-law of an English duke. Sir Henry's whole soul was bound up in a model farm in Norfolk, which his wife's fortune enabled him to mismanage with impunity. He had never got over his intense disgust with his daughters for not being sons, and he left them and the disposal of them entirely in the hands of his wife and of their uncle Lord Florencecourt, who, having no daughters of his own, took an almost paternal interest in his nieces.

Lord Florencecourt had made up his mind that a marriage between his favourite, George Lauriston, and one of his nieces would be an admirable arrangement, giving to the young officer the money which would do so much to forward his advancement in the world, and to one of the girls an honourable, manly husband, who might some day do great things. The match would, besides, strengthen the bonds of mutual friendship and liking between himself and the young man.

It was one evening when the two men were driving in a hansom to dine at Sir Henry's, that the elder broached the subject in his usual harsh, abrupt tone, but with a generous fire in his eyes, which showed the depth and the quality of his interest in the matter.

Lauriston, taken by surprise, betrayed a reluctance, almost a repugnance, to the idea which filled the elder man with anger and disappointment.

"I see," said he, with a short dry laugh. "You have picked up with some pretty chorus-girl, and are not ready for matrimony."

"You are mistaken, Colonel, I assure you. I have picked up nobody. But it is hardly surprising if your constant jibes at love and matrimony should have taken root in me, who honour your opinions so much."

He spoke somewhat stiffly, because he had to choose his words, feeling rather guilty. Lord Florencecourt broke in brusquely:

"All d——d nonsense! Jibes at love only take root in a young man to grow into intrigues. There's an end of the matter; don't refer to it again."

They were at their destination. Lord Florencecourt sprang from the hansom first, out of temper for the evening; Lauriston followed very soberly.

Sir Henry's town house was one of the big mansions of

Grosvenor Square. It had a large dome-like arch over the entrance, and was painted a violent staring white, which made the smoke-begrimed houses on either side, with their rusty iron lamp-frames and antiquated extinguishers, quite a refreshing sight. The interior was furnished handsomely, in the prevailing upholsterer's taste, without any distinguishing features ; for Lady Millard, though she still cherished certain luxurious and unconventional notions which in her native country she would have indulged, was too much bound down by the prejudices of her present rank, to dare to infringe ever so little on the rules which governed the rest of her order. So that while she inwardly knew an indiarubber plant by itself in a bilious or livid earthenware vase to be an abomination, she had an indiarubber plant in a bilious yellow vase in front of her middle dining-room window, because the Countess of Redscar had one in a livid blue vase in hers. And in spite of her feeling that to strew a litter of natural flowers over a dinner-table, to fade and wither before one's eyes in the heated air, is stupid, inconvenient, and ugly, she yielded to that, as she did to every passing fashion set by her higher-born neighbours.

She followed a more sensible English fashion in having two most beautiful girls among her children. Cicely and Charlotte, the two eldest, were tall, fair as lilies, limpid-eyed, small-mouthed, innocent, sweet and rather silly. Dressed as they were on this evening in white muslin dresses, which looked to masculine eyes as if they might have been made by the wearers themselves, though they were in reality a triumph of a Bond Street milliner, they made the dull minutes before dinner interesting by their mere physical loveliness. Unfortunately for her, fortunately perhaps for them, the youngest of the three girls was a foil, not an addition to the family beauty. Small, sallow, and plain, Ella Millard did not attempt to make up for her deficiency in good looks by any special attraction of manner. To most people she seemed shy, abrupt, and almost repellent ; such a contrast, as everybody said, to her charming and amiable sisters. But with the minority for whom fools, however beautiful, have no charm, Ella was the favourite ; and George Lauriston, an *habitué* of the house, had got into the habit of making straight for the chair by her side at every opportunity, with the distinct conviction that she was an awfully nice girl.

On this occasion he took in to dinner the second sister, Charlotte, and he found that her placid, amiable face and wearisome gabble about the Opera, the Academy, and Marion Crawford's new novel—(Charlotte prided herself on having plenty to say)—irritated him to a degree he had never before thought himself capable of reaching.

When the gentlemen entered the drawing-room after dinner, George Lauriston, seeing Ella in a corner by herself, made at once for the seat by her side. She made way for him almost without looking up, as if she had expected him.

"How cross you looked at dinner," she said; "I was glad you took Charlotte in and not me."

"No, you were not. If I had taken you I should not have been cross."

"That is quite true. Charlotte is sweet-tempered and will put up with a man's moods; I should have turned my back upon you and let you sulk."

"Yes; you are a hard, disagreeable creature."

"But such a relief after my poor Charlotte. Now tell me what is the matter with you."

"Nothing except ill-temper. At least—to say the truth, I hardly can tell you."

"Nonsense. You can tell me anything, after the stream of nonsense I have heard at different times from you."

"But this isn't nonsense. Lord Florencecourt wants me to marry one of your sisters."

"Well, I dare say you could get one of them to have you, if I backed you up. You see I am so out of the running that they think a good deal of my advice."

"Don't tease. He really has set his heart upon it."

"And pray, my lord commander-in-chief, don't you think you might do much worse? They are both as pretty as peaches, perfectly sweet and good, and either would worship you meekly and mildly as a god and a hero; besides which they have other and more substantial advantages, and you would have the satisfaction of cutting out many better men."

"You are very cheeky this evening."

"Do you know I used to think you rather admired Charlotte?"

"Admired her! How can one help admiring them both? Only they are such a perfect match that one couldn't love,

honour, and obey—that's it, isn't it?—the one without loving, honouring, and obeying the other."

"That's an evasion," said Ella, piercing him with her brown, bead-like eyes. She continued to look at him fixedly while she counted slowly on her fingers. "One—two—three—three weeks ago you were not in the same mind."

Lauriston started and grew red, and the brown eyes twinkled.

"Three weeks ago, if my uncle had made you this suggestion, you would have taken it differently."

"What do you mean?"

"That something has happened in the meantime to divert your admiration into another channel. Oh, I know. I am not a 'silent member' for nothing; when I am called upon to give my vote, my mind is a good deal clearer on the subject in hand than those of the active debaters."

"Well, supposing I told you I wanted to marry you?"

"You would not dare to come to *me* with such a story."

"Why not? You like me; you have always shown it. You are nicer to me than you are to almost anybody."

"I like you certainly, though I think at present you're rather a prig; but perhaps that is only because it is a case of sour grapes."

"Sour grapes!"

"Yes. For if I had been handsome I would have married you; I like you enough for that."

"Then why in heaven's name won't you marry me?" asked Lauriston, much excited.

"Simply because you would take me to avoid something worse; and that I have no attractions strong enough to keep you if the 'something worse' should try to get hold of you again."

Lauriston was amazed and shocked at this penetration on the part of a young girl. He gave her a shy look out of the corners of his eyes, and leaned forward on his knees, his handsome brown head bent, playing with his moustache with moist, nervous fingers. She laughed as she looked at him, with a sound in her voice which struck him, though he could not quite make up his mind whether it was tender or bitter.

"I have some astonishing notions for a girl, haven't I?" she said quietly. "But after all it is not so very surprising

if you will consider the facts a little. Here am I, a girl too plain, too unattractive to be worshipped like my sisters, too proud to be married for the only attraction I share with them, and not at all inclined to do homage to a sex that prefers a beautiful wax dolly to—well, to a faithful and intelligent dog.” There was no mistaking the bitterness of her tone now, while the half resentful, half plaintive expression of her eyes made her face at least interesting. “So I have had to carve out a life for myself, with peculiar pleasures and peculiar interests. I read and I study to an extent which would almost disgust you perhaps; and I watch, and listen, and think until I know as much of life and of the people I meet as Charlotte and Cicely know of their ‘points’ and the colours which suit their complexions.”

“I shall begin to be afraid of you,” said George.

“Why?” asked Ella, folding her hands and sitting up stiff and straight as a school-teacher. There was a *jardinière* full of pretty flowering plants near the ottoman on which they were sitting. Charlotte or Cicely would have taken the opportunity to lean forward and play with or gather some of the blossoms, to show off their figure and the pretty curves of their wrists. But Ella, when she chose to talk, always became too much interested in her subject to have thought for petty coquetries, and so she sat, with the calm intent face of a judge, prepared to give an impartial, yet kindly, hearing to George’s answer.

“Because you are so clever.”

“And so are you. But even if you were not, you would have no need to be afraid of me. It would be as reasonable of me to be afraid of you, because I know that if you liked you are strong enough to kill me with one blow of your fist, as for you to think I would use my wits to do you harm. One does not turn one’s strength against one’s friends.”

“That is true,” said George, touched by the girl’s tone. “Ella, why won’t you marry me? Only two women in all my life have ever woke any strong feeling in me: until this evening I could have said ‘only one’—a little wild girl whose influence I dread, though I have only met her twice. You will think me a weak fool, perhaps, but a woman, however clever she may be, cannot in such a case judge a man. There are influences at work in a man’s coarser nature that no sweet and innocent girl could understand. To-night you

have given me the first glimpse I have ever been able to catch into the depths of your warm heart and your noble mind ; I see in you the type of all that is best in women ; and I know that if you would have me all that is best in me would grow and expand until I might in time be worthy of the affection of a good woman. Ella, will you try me ? ”

The girl was looking away from him, still sitting very upright, and drinking in his words with an intent expression on her face. At last she turned her head slowly, and her eyes, mournful and earnest, gazed full into those of the young man, who had poured out his appeal with passionate excitement, and now sat, flushed and eager, awaiting her answer.

“ Can you wait for my reply till to-morrow ? ” she asked, with a curiously searching expression.

“ Why to-morrow ? What would you know to-morrow that you don’t know to-night ? ”

“ You are going to see the girl to-night ! ” said Ella, with a sudden inspiration.

“ If you will not have me—yes. It is a promise. If you, now that you know everything, will take me, I hold myself absolved from a promise to another woman, and before Heaven I swear that you will have nothing more to fear ; I will never see her again. Only a woman can drive another woman out of a man’s head. Ella, no one has ever crept so near to my heart as you. Will you come right in ? ”

If she had not cared for him so much, she would have said yes. But the tenderness she had long secretly felt, without owning it to herself, for the handsome young officer, made her timid. If she were to marry him, she, with the fierce depths of unsuspected passion she felt stirring at her heart, would adore him, would be at his mercy, bereft of the shield of sarcasm and reserve with which she could hide her weakness now. She knew that the feeling which brought him to her was not so strong as, though it was probably better than, that which impelled him away. She dared not risk so much on a single stroke. Yearning, doubt, fear, resolution, all passed so quickly through her mind that she had kept him waiting for his reply very few moments when she rose, and with a face as still and set as if she had not for a moment wavered, she said :

"I can give you no answer now. If you are in the same mind a month hence, ask me again."

George gave a hard laugh as he too rose.

"It will be too late," he said coldly. "But I thank you for hearing me. Good-night."

He shook hands with her in a mechanical manner, not even noticing in his agitation the nervous pressure of her fingers. If he had looked again in her face he would have seen that she relented; as it was, he was at the other end of the room taking leave of her father and mother before she had time to realise the decisiveness of the step she had taken. Scourging herself with reproaches, remorseful, miserable, Ella Millard got little sleep that night.

George Lauriston had hardly got half-a-dozen yards from the house when he heard Lord Florencecourt's short, youthful step behind him, and a moment later the Colonel had slipped his arm through his, with a friendliness he showed to no one but his favourite.

"Well, George, which of the two is it?" he asked in a much more genial tone than usual.

"Which of the two!" repeated Lauriston vaguely.

"Yes, yes, you were talking to the sister all the evening; now there is only one subject which makes a young man so utterly oblivious of everything else. Come, you can confess to me; which of her two sisters were you trying to get her influence with?"

"I was trying to get her influence with Ella Millard."

The Colonel stopped, pulled the young man face to face with him by a sharp wrench of the arm, and looked up into his face with his most steely expression.

"Are you serious?" he asked in a grating voice.

"Most serious, I assure you, sir."

"You asked that yellow-skinned, swarthy little girl to marry you?"

"I think, Colonel, the most important thing about a wife is not the colour of her skin."

"There you're wrong, entirely wrong. Your fair white woman may be cold, may be irritating, she may henpeck you by day, she may nag at you at night. But for treachery, for unfaithfulness, for every quality which leads a man to ruin, despair and dishonour, go to your dark-complexioned woman. Ella is my niece, and as she is plain, she may go through life without doing much harm. But I would rather see a

hump grow on her shoulders, and flames come from her mouth as she talked, than see her marry a man in whom I take an interest, as I do in you, George."

"You need have no fear in this case, Colonel, for she won't have me," said Lauriston, not attempting to combat the Colonel's superstitious prejudices, which were as strong as those of any old woman.

And as, in his relief on finding that his fears were groundless, Lord Florencecourt let his hand drop from the young man's arm, the latter took the opportunity to bid him good-night and walk off with the excuse of an appointment.

If even Ella's skin was too dark to please him, what would the Colonel find to say of Nouna's, he thought, wondering how the old soldier had picked up his strong prejudice. Could he really have been once under the sway of a woman compared to whom even the present Lady Florencecourt, with all her tyranny, ill-humour and caprices, was as light after darkness? Lauriston had no means of telling, and the question did not trouble him long. For to-night was the last night of the week in the course of which Nouna had made him swear that he would return, and he knew that the girl was even now anxiously on the watch for him. He felt that he would have done better to have made his call that morning, to have seen her under the prosaic influences of daylight and Mrs. Ellis, as he had intended to do. But a friend had called unexpectedly to carry him off to Hurlingham, and had left him no chance of keeping his oath except by slipping a note into the letter-box of 36, Mary Street, in the darkness of the evening. This would satisfy his conscience and save him from the danger of the girl's alluring eyes.

Yet as he walked quickly through the quiet West-End streets, past brightly-lighted houses, where a strip of carpet was thrown across the pavement, and a seedy, silent old man or a couple of lads waited to see the ladies come out, Lauriston felt his heart beating faster as the image of the little Indian girl came to his mind with a thousandfold additional charm after his evening spent in the commonplace *ennui* of a London dinner-party. He honestly tried to think of Ella—good, clever little Ella—whose kindness and sweetness had touched him so much only half-an-hour ago. But then had she not herself rejected his offered homage, thrown him back on the charm that was now

drawing him with an attraction which grew stronger with his resistance to it?

He reached Mary Street at last. By this time it had grown so dark that it was reasonable to think he might drop his note in the letter-box and walk away without being seen. But he knew all the same that he should not be allowed to do so. The lights were burning both on the first-floor and the ground-floor of No. 36 when he slipped his little missive into the box; as he did so the blind of one of the ground-floor windows was raised, and a woman looked out and instantly disappeared. He thought he would not ring, but was lingering for one moment on the doorstep almost as if he knew that his presence must be known, when he heard the chain drawn and the door opened. He felt that his whole body was throbbing with fierce excitement.

But it was not Nouna. It was the dark-complexioned Rahas whom he had treated so unceremoniously on his first visit, and who now stood in the same handsome Eastern dress he had worn on that occasion, but with a very different demeanour, holding the door wide open, and with dignified and courteous words inviting the young Englishman to enter. Lauriston, after a moment's hesitation, accepted the invitation, and passing in stood in the hall while his host closed the door, wondering what were to be his adventures that night. The shutting of the door was accomplished very slowly, with infinite precautions against noise, while Lauriston glanced up the staircase, listened intently for a light footfall, and felt all the enervating rapture which the near neighbourhood of his first passionate love gives to a very young man. Turning rather suddenly again towards his companion, he found the eyes of the Oriental fixed upon him in what struck him as a peculiar manner. As their eyes met, the merchant, with a low bow and a gesture of courteous invitation, held open the door on the left and ushered his visitor in. Lauriston entered with a glance at the doors and a glance at the windows to decide upon the best way of escape should the conduct of the gentleman in the fez be consistent with the sinister expression of his face.

CHAPTER VI.

WE have all met fairly bad people with strikingly good faces, and perhaps fairly good people with strikingly bad faces ; but when the eyes of a stranger who has no reason to love you are much nearer together than beauty demands, when his lips are thin, straight, and very close under his nose, moreover when he smiles at you with his mouth only and shows you even more politeness than the occasion requires, you must be more than simple-minded to put implicit trust in him.

Lauriston noted these traits in Rahas, and mistrusted him accordingly. But the meeting itself being an adventure, and therefore welcome to a young man in love, he beamed with perfect good humour and began to apologise for his abrupt conduct on the night of his first visit. Rahas stopped him at once, smiling and waving the subject away as if to be flung over the rail of his own staircase by such a person as his visitor were the highest honour he could wish for. He, for his part, seeing this gentleman pass, could not resist the impulse which prompted him to open the door and beg him to enter, that he might apologise for his obtuseness in not instinctively recognising the gentleman as a person of high honour and distinction, incapable of any but the noblest motives, the most lofty conduct. He bowed to Lauriston, Lauriston bowed to him ; they positively overflowed with civility, though from the sly black eyes of the Asiatic, and from the frank brown ones of the Englishman, there peeped out an easily discernible mutual antagonism.

"Will this gentleman, whose name I have not the honour of knowing——"

"My name is Lauriston," said George, who knew that this cunning-looking person could easily find it out if he were to conceal it.

"Will Mr. Lauriston," continued the merchant with a bow, "do me the honour to smoke with me? I have narghills, cigars, cigarettes, such as, if I may make the boast, you could not find in the palaces of your Prince of Wales."

"Thank you," said Lauriston, who indeed felt some temptation to stay in the house, but had no fancy for his companion; "it is very kind of you to ask me, but I must be returning to my quarters. We soldiers, you know, are very strictly looked after in England."

The merchant smiled in a manner which implied that his ignorance of English manners and customs was not so limited as might have been inferred from his slow, pedantic speech, and his retention of the costume of his own country.

"That strictness is, however, somewhat relaxed in the case of favoured officers—at least, they say so in Smyrna," said he ingenuously. "But perhaps the real reason of Mr. Lauriston's reluctance to accept my humble invitation is the feeling that to do so would be an unbecoming act of condescension from an English officer to a foreign tradesman."

"No, I assure you——"

The merchant raised his hand. "Perhaps Mr. Lauriston will allow me to explain. My uncle and I are established here at present in only a very modest manner. We live in what I suppose may be called a back street of your vast city; we have no acre-wide apartments, no gaudy shop-windows in which our treasures are arranged by cunning shopmen to catch the eye of the vulgar. We have only, as you know, a few of the cheaper and simpler products of our own rich land, placed without thought or care in these two small dusty windows, not to attract the casual passer-by, but to let our great clients know that this is where Rahas and Fanah may be found. We are merchants, not shopmen; we have for our customers the chiefs of your great bazaars, the heads of your most renowned London houses. If an English nobleman wants a carpet such as emperors might tread upon, or a millionaire of Manchester seeks a priceless cabinet of carved ivory, delicate as lace, fragile as a fairy's fingers, it is to us that their agents come, to Rahas and Fanah, who are here merely obscure tradesmen known to a few, but in our country (and all Asia is our country, overrun by our agents, swarming with our depôts) merchant-nobles, the guests and the friends of kings."

It was not difficult to believe him as he stood, stately and dignified, his black eyes glowing with roused pride, his graceful dress giving an air of distinction to his tall, lean figure. Under the influence of a passion which was at least genuine he appeared to so much greater advantage that George Lauriston did not hesitate to give way to his importunity ; and the merchant led him from the little front-room in which they had been standing, where small objects such as those that filled the windows were scattered about on tables and shelves and piled on packing cases, into an apartment of the same size at the back, communicating with the front-room by folding-doors, but showing, as soon as they were passed, the difference between a living-room and a mere workshop or office.

It was furnished with extreme simplicity and hung with the most inexpensive kind of thin Indian curtains. There were two or three small painted tables, on one of which was a common metal coffee-pot surrounded by three or four tiny earthenware cups, while on another stood a small decanter labelled brandy, an ice-pail, a stand with soda-water bottles, two deep tumblers, and a liqueur glass. The seats consisted of ottomans covered with dark striped stuff, a few plain large cushions, and a couple of low chairs, very small in the seat and very wide in the back. A brass lantern took the place formerly filled by a chandelier, and gave forth a soft weak light through orange-tinted glass. The floor was entirely covered by matting, which added to the invitingly cool aspect of the room. To the right as he entered from the front room, Lauriston noticed a tall paper screen placed before the doorway of a third apartment, the door of which had been taken away and replaced by thin coloured curtains, through which there shone a much brighter light than that given by the brass lamp.

"My uncle's room," said Rahas, indicating the inner apartment with a movement of his hand, as he brought forth for his guest, from a cupboard in the wall behind the curtains, cigars, cigarettes, and a hookah. "He gives up the best to me, though I am only a junior partner in the firm, by right of my father—a mere clerk in fact."

Lauriston took a cigar and seated himself in a chair ; while his host sat on one of the ottomans, his left elbow buried in a cushion, languidly smoking a long hookah. Something in the atmosphere of the room, its studied cool-

ness, the stately composure of its owner, the faint perfume which began to rise from the bubbling water of the hookah, began to exercise over Lauriston the same enervating influence which he had felt in the far more luxurious chamber above. The soft voice of the merchant, speaking in measured tones, as if speech were spontaneous music, lulled him into a state of dreamy expectancy of some further experience new and strange.

"You would fall very easily and naturally into our Eastern ways, more easily than most of your race, I think," he said ; and Lauriston felt conscious, now that he saw him reclining at his ease, of a charm in the manner of the Oriental which he had not seen before. "You can rest, which is to most of the men of North Europe an impossibility."

Lauriston sat upright in his chair, consciously struggling against the charm which was ensnaring his senses. "What you call rest," he said earnestly, "is a temporary torpor necessary to you, a warmer-blooded race, and is the natural reaction from your passionate moods, in which you are all fire. But for us, a colder nation, what you call rest is a dangerous soothing of the mind and stimulating of the senses, an enslaving pleasure to be avoided by those who have a battle to fight, and much to win. The only wholesome rest for us is dead, dreamless sleep."

"And yet," said the Oriental, smoking solemnly on, yet observing his companion with attentive eyes, "you give way to the pleasure, and you court the charm."

Lauriston grew red, though the subdued light did not betray his blushes. "When one suddenly meets with a new experience a little curiosity and interest are only natural," he said.

"Yes, yes. But the curiosity and interest of Englishmen display themselves in ways so strange to us of another race. For instance, I will tell you a tale : Two young men of your race, men well-born perhaps, clothed in the fashion of your princes and your nobles, hideous and ill-chosen to us, but of the taste which in England is called the very best—see by night in a dark little dusty room where the blinds have not been pulled down, a man and a lady. The lady is beautiful, not dressed as their women are, and neither is English, the young men think. So they stare in until they attract the man's attention, when for shame they slink off, to return the next day, and the next, and the next, always

foolish, trifling, impertinent, spying and prying for another sight of the lady, whom they never behold again. Then a third young Englishman—perhaps I need not say more about his course, but that it is bolder than that of the others——”

Lauriston interrupted him. “I see,” he said in a low voice strongly-controlled, “that you believe me to be merely the accomplice of the two others. I do know who they are, I know they got me here by a trick, although until this moment I never guessed one word of it. Sir,” he rose, very quietly and composedly, but with passion which was unmistakably fierce and strong glowing in his handsome face, “I don’t know how to address a gentleman of your country, but I wish to apologise in the humblest and fullest manner for an offence which I committed in all ignorance. By Heaven, when I meet those two infernal little cads——!” he broke out suddenly, forfeiting all right, in his vehemence, to the praise bestowed by Rahas on his capabilities of repose.

But he was checked in all the heat of his outbreak by sounds behind him which recalled him to the fact that he might have unseen listeners to his very unrestrained language. Turning sharply, he saw the curtains behind the screen move and open against the light, as if some one were retreating between them. Rahas attempted to reassure him by a gesture of the hand.

“My uncle thought we were quarrelling perhaps,” said he in a leisurely manner.

But the knowledge that everything he uttered could be heard by a person who might or might not be a desirable confidant cast a strong constraint on Lauriston, who tossed the end of his cigar into an ash-tray by his side and made at once for the door. The merchant shook his head gently, and with courteous words begged him to return.

“I guessed the truth before, and you must pardon my anxiety to have it confirmed by your own lips,” he said gravely and deferentially. “Or rather,” he went on, as Lauriston turned and hesitated, “I did not guess, I knew.”

In his astonishment at the merchant’s confident tone, his companion came a step nearer to the chair he had left, and at the next words of his host reseated himself, overcome by an attraction he this time made no great effort to resist.

“Between your first and your second visit I learnt the causes and effects of your appearance here ; between your

second visit and this, the third, I learnt that it was not your intention to appear here again."

"How did you learn it?" asked Lauriston, with some incredulity, but with the tinge of respect for possibly supernatural agencies to be expected in a man brought up north o' Tweed.

"You are an Englishman, and would not believe me. Yours is a brave nation, an energetic and a splendid race; but you have no imagination, no religion but faith in beef and bricks and mortar and the Stock Exchange."

"I believe in beef certainly, and I don't like humbug," said the young officer rather shortly. "But I'm not a fool, and when I hear about anything of which I have no experience, I listen and do my best to understand."

The merchant bowed and went on: "You are doubtless not ignorant, Mr. Lauriston, of the importance we of the East attach to astral influences, nor of the fact that the subject is with us considered a study worthy a high place among the sciences." Lauriston bowed his head in assent. "It is one of the principles of that science—you understand I speak according to the beliefs of my countrymen, without prejudice to the acumen of yours—that persons born under the ascendancy of a particular star, whose name in your tongue I do not know, and whose name in mine would bear no meaning to you, possess a power which I can best describe as magnetic over persons born under the ascendancy of another particular planet. Now I am one of the former class, and the lady who lives on the first floor of this house is one of the latter."

Lauriston felt an impulse of rage at the fellow's presumption.

"How did you know anything about her planet?" he asked in a constrained tone.

"I cast her nativity two days ago," answered the merchant, dropping his voice as if from pure laziness, almost to a whisper. "I know something about astrology myself, and as I take in the lady the respectful interest of a friend, I put my services at her disposal, by her own request. I may own that I took a personal interest in finding out whether her destiny would cross my own." He paused a few moments, during which Lauriston, in spite of the studied incredulity with which he listened to all this, felt his excitement rising. "But I could find nothing to justify my hopes. As far as my skill could serve, I made out that her destiny was bound

up with the countrymen of her father, the land of her adoption."

While setting this down as quackery, the young Englishman was interested and stirred by the Oriental's measured utterances.

"Yet you say your own planet, horoscope, whatever you call it, gave you an influence over her?" he asked in a careless tone.

"In this way," the merchant went on : "I can make her sleep, and in her sleep I can bring before her eyes what vision I will ; I can learn things concerning her which she herself in her waking hours does not know."

"Why, that is a sort of mesmerism ; they do that over here without any aid from the planets."

"So you think. So perhaps the sea thinks that her tides advance and recede independently of the moon. And so, in Europe, Nature's occult marvels are sneered at, and great forces wasted, which we Asiatics turn to account in moulding the courses of our lives."

"Will you explain?"

"In England a person gifted with this force which his neighbours ignore and he himself cannot understand, casts another into a sleep, a trance. Here is this creature, for good or for ill, at his mercy, in his power. What does he do? Teach him some great truth? Force from him some vital secret? Subdue the acknowledged evil in him to some good end? No. He makes him find a pin, drink a glass of water, blow his nose. Then, having accomplished this noble end at some expenditure of his own vital force, he awakens the sleeper ; and what is gained? A dozen fools have gaped, cried : 'Marvellous!' or, 'Well, I never!' according to their measure of refinement, and gone their ways no whit wiser than before."

"Yes, well, and you? How do you use this force?"

"In different ways. Sometimes to extort an enemy's secret, sometimes to test a woman's faith—but this last not often ; for experience and Mahomet teach us that women have no souls, and that by concerning ourselves more with what they do than with what they feel, we shall spare ourselves many disappointments."

"You are a Mahometan then?"

"With the modifications which result from long contact with men of other faiths. Thus I drink wine, in modera-

tion ; I look upon images and statues without horror ; and I believe that by springing from a race whose men have for generations believed that women may have spiritual life, the best of your European maids do indeed attain in time to something which may pass for a soul."

"And Nouna ?"

The merchant smiled. "Ask Mrs. Ellis, her guardian, who has known her for some years, what impression the bible-readings, the church-goings, the preachings, the prayings, the exhortations of her Christian teachers have had on her, the letters of her mother, whom she adores, and who never writes to her daughter without an exhortation to religion ! All the bishops in the world would not make Nouna more of a Christian than her Persian kittens."

"You can say as much of many English girls," said Lauriston hastily and uneasily.

"Of most," assented the Oriental readily. "And of nine-tenths of the most orthodox of your alms-giving and priest-loving women. What spirit lives in their charity ? in their worship ? When man no longer cares for their devotion, they yield it to God, the priest, and the respectful poor."

"And you can see no evidence of a soul in that very capacity for devotion ?"

"No more than I see in the much more absorbing devotion of my dog."

"That seems to me a creed as degrading to the man who holds it as to the woman whose self-respect it kills."

"And like all creeds, in practice it loses both its best and its worst characteristics. I never go out in London without seeing hundreds of women more vile, more wretched, more miserable, than my more merciful religion would ever allow those weaker creatures to become ; while in our harems, which shock you so much, there is many a woman for whose power on earth some of your proud European beauties would willingly exchange their hopes of heaven."

"Perhaps," said Lauriston shortly ; and, after a pause, he said, "You say Nouna's destiny is bound up with that of an Englishman ; if that is so, and he is one of the right sort, depend upon it he will do more for her than all her teachers and preachers ever did."

"You think so ?"

"I am sure of it. I believe the influence of an honest

man's love to be stronger than that of all the mesmerists that ever hid pins or learned secrets."

"You believe it, even after the proof I gave you! Will you hold to your belief in the face of this? I now, at this moment, by the force I hold over her, command her to leave her room up stairs and come down here to us."

There was a long silence: the Asiatic held the stem of his hookah in his hand and sat like a statue, his lips tightly compressed, his eyes brilliant and fixed. Lauriston also left off smoking, listening and watching the door with intense excitement which made him sick and cold. For some minutes there was not a sound to be heard but the faint night-cries and noises that came through the open window. At last a board creaked in the hall outside, a knock was heard on the door of the front-room, then the turning of the handle, and a voice called weakly:

"Rahas, are you there?"

Lauriston started up; the merchant never moved. The door of the room they were in was drawn softly ajar, and Nouna's voice almost in a whisper asked:

"Has Mr. Lauriston been here? Tell me, hasn't he been here?"

The young Englishman crossed the room with two strides, and pushed the door gently open with a shaking hand. The little weak voice thrilled him to the heart. She peeped in round the door, all in clinging white, with a laugh in her eyes at sight of him, but with a rather subdued and dreamy manner.

"I fancied you were here. I seemed to hear you call me," she said sleepily, as she came in and very composedly leaned upon his arm.

In the midst of the glow and the glamour cast upon him by the girl's entrance, Lauriston was startled by the voice of Rahas close to his ear:

"Will you not acknowledge now that it was my influence over her which brought her down?"

"No," answered the young Englishman in a husky voice, "her own words prove that it was mine."

The merchant shrugged his shoulders, and with a bow to the lady, who was too much occupied with her companion to notice it, retreated behind the screen into the curtained room.

CHAPTER VII.

GEORGE LAURISTON was very much in love; but all the circumstances of his love adventure were so strange, so mysterious, that at this moment, when the supernatural appeared to have come to the aid of the simply marvellous, the chill of some uncanny horror seemed to check his passion, and he looked down at the girl by his side rather as on some fairy changeling than as on the beautiful woman who had lately usurped such an undue share of his inmost thoughts. After a short silence Nouna looked up, half timidly, half saucily :

"Have you then nothing to say to me? Is a week so long a time that you have forgotten I speak your language?"

"I have forgotten nothing about you," said he, not encouraging her clinging pressure on his arm, but standing up stiff and straight, with his eyes fixed on the screen and the curtains behind it. "I will come and see you and Mrs. Ellis to-morrow, Nouna, it is too late for me to stay now."

She followed the glance of his eyes, and suddenly dropping his arm made a cat-like bound to the screen, and pulled it down. A figure was seen to move away quickly, like a shadow, from behind the curtains, and the next moment Rahas came through them.

"Who is in that room?" asked Nouna imperiously.

"My uncle, Nouna. Why are you so excited?"

"Your uncle Fanah? No one else?"

"No one."

He stepped back and opening the curtains again, said a few words in a language strange to Lauriston. A little old man with a grey beard and a dried-up, wrinkled face,

wearing a crimson turban and a very simple Eastern dress, came slowly in and bowed to the stranger.

"Are you satisfied now?" asked Rahas.

"Ye—es," said the girl doubtfully, passing her hand over her eyes and shivering, "I suppose so." Then, turning to Lauriston, she continued, with the tone of a child playing at royalty, "You will honour me by coming up stairs to my apartments for a few minutes. I will not detain you long."

She curtsied to the two merchants, and led the way back through the front room with a gesture to the young Englishman to follow her, as Lauriston did, after taking a hasty leave of his host. The girl seemed to be in such a subdued, sleepy mood that he was prepared for her to behave in a more conventional manner than usual. He was quite off his guard therefore when, having reached the top of the staircase, she suddenly swept round, her white garments swirling after her, and threw herself like a panther upon him, with such electric suddenness and force that, if his hand had not been upon the stair-rail, he would have fallen down the stairs. She was curled about him, her feet off the ground, her arms round his neck, her breast against his. It was such an altogether unlooked for and bewildering proceeding that Lauriston, after a moment's choking sensation, put his arms round her, carried her to the door of her smaller sitting-room, and attempted to put her down on her feet. As she resisted and refused to stand, he looked round him, and seeing a chair against the wall, placed her, still limp and apparently helpless, very gently upon it, and laid his fingers on the handle of the sitting-room door. The little lady sprang back into vigorous life immediately.

"You are not going in!" she said in a hissing whisper, her face full of alarm and disappointment; "Mrs. Ellis is in there!"

"That is why I'm going in. I came to see Mrs. Ellis, not you."

For a moment the girl looked ready to burst into tears, but with another change of mood she slid off her chair and came up to him, laughing.

"Are all Englishmen like you, all stone and steel? or has poor little Nouna fallen upon the very hardest?" she asked, her tone changing from playful to plaintive before she had finished speaking. And she folded her small hands

one in the other and looked up with a face so doleful that Lauriston wanted to laugh. "Mamma says Englishmen are noble and brave and good, and so I thought—when I saw you, and you were kind and sweet to me—that you were perhaps sent to me—coming so suddenly in the midst of my sleep—the great Rajah mamma said I was to wait for and obey and humble myself to, as a woman should to her lord. She said he would come certainly if I was very good, and I had been good for nearly three weeks, and had given Mrs. Ellis hardly any trouble at all ; so I thought, you see," she said, looking up into his face naïvely, "that you were the Rajah. Well, I was wrong, that's all. You prefer Mrs. Ellis."

George Lauriston listened to this harangue with every feeling of tenderness that can move a man, from that of a father for a wayward child to that of a lover for a beautiful woman. He saw in her alternately bold and ingenuous words, in the wondering child looks that came into her eyes between passionate ebullitions of love, of anger, and of pride, in the utter absence of a grown woman's modest reticence, that the little creature before him was now, whatever time and her fellow-men might hereafter make of her, nothing but a wild, untrained, half-grown young thing, with the good and bad impulses of a savage, and a thousand fascinations which would be so many desperate dangers to her ill-guarded womanhood.

In those few moments Lauriston made up his mind. The girl had for him an irresistible attraction which made every other woman insipid and inane. In spite of her mysterious antecedents, of her equivocal surroundings, he believed most firmly in her native innocence and goodness. Her odd sense of her own dignity, her passionate love for her mother, her plaintive account of her impression of the first meeting with himself, all tended to confirm this opinion, and also to give some weight to the shadowy legends which seemed to form her personal history. He would write to the mother, if possible go and see her, ask her consent to his engagement to her daughter, and himself choose some home where the girl might spend a couple of years in good hands, while he on his side would strain every nerve and save every penny that he might be able, at the end of that time, to make her his wife. He had no doubts about the success of his suit ; everything pointed to the fact that this

shadowy adored and adoring mother would be glad to get the half-spoilt, half-neglected, wholly ill-brought-up girl, off her hands.

He looked down again on the little creature as she, in a fit of petulance at her inability to pique him, leant against the wall and, like a mischievous monkey, tore one of the loose muslin sleeves of her dress into strips. Observing this suggestive occupation, George felt suddenly appalled by the enormous hardihood of the undertaking to which he was inwardly pledging himself. She glanced up, saw the look of consternation on his face, and fell into convulsions of stifled laughter. The set expression on his features broke up, as he laid his hand very tenderly upon her shoulder.

"Hush, you mustn't laugh like that. You will make yourself ill."

Sensitive to every change of feeling as an Eolian harp is to every breath of air, she was quiet at once, and putting both her own hands on his to keep it on her shoulders, she said in a very soft voice, with earnest eyes that seemed to draw out from his the emotion she knew how to excite in him :

"Ah, I like to hear you speak to me like that. You must always speak like that to me, and then I will always be like this."

She folded her little hands, still with one of his clasped between them, madonna-like against her breast, and bowed her head low in token of deep, devoted humility. It was the passionate human warmth within her, glowing in her impulses of love and hate, and freezing in her bursts of pride, which had melted so quickly the heart of the reserved young Englishman, and made her irresistible to him.

In a burst of most deep, most loyal tenderness, he lifted her up in his arms, and curled her slender limbs about him, and held her like a cherished pet lamb against his breast.

"My darling," he whispered in her ear—a little shell-like ear of rose and ivory tints—"I shall speak to you always as a man speaks to the creature that lives in his heart, whom he loves, whom he trusts, whom he worships. And you, Nouna, must be good and gentle, and grow up into a sweet, noble woman for me, so that my love for you may make me better. I can never give you a palace, Nouna, or elephants with golden trappings ; if I can ever buy you diamonds it will

not be till you are too old to care for them ; and you will only have one slave. But you will be a queen to me, my darling, as long as our lives last ; and I will get on and make my name famous, so that you shall not envy the proudest maharanee in India, you shall be so happy as the good true wife of a plain English gentleman."

"Wife !" repeated Nouna wonderingly, raising her head from his shoulder to peer into his eyes. "That is what mamma always says. I must be good and be the wife of an English gentleman, and then I shall be happy ! Are all the wives of English gentlemen so happy ?"

George felt hot. Those gleaming black eyes, though they could not read thoughts half so quickly and surely as they did feelings, had a steadiness and persistency that made it hard to look into them and tell a lie.

"All those that are beautiful and good like you are happy, unless they marry bad men."

"How can they tell they're bad before they've married them ? You might be bad, and I shouldn't know."

"You will have time to find out in the two years that must pass before I can marry you."

"Two years !" She began writhing and wriggling in his arms like an electric eel. "Put me down, put me down at once !" She enforced her command with such agile movements that he had to comply. "I'm not going to wait two years !" And she readjusted her crumpled draperies with an injured manner. "I shall marry you at once, or else I shall not marry you at all. I shall have Rahas ; he has changed to-day, and says he only desires my happiness ; but he shall change back again and desire me for a wife. I will not wait two years. You do not love me. Love is for now, not for two years !"

He has changed to-day ! Those words struck Lauriston, and reminded him again of the strangeness of the circumstances which surrounded the girl he loved, and of the impossibility of settling anything until he had heard from her mother.

"Very well, Nouna," he said gently, "I won't quarrel with you for wanting to have me before I am well off. I must leave you now, my darling, and I will write to your mother in the morning. Tell me her address."

"She is in Spain, now travelling about ; we always write to her lawyers."

"Well, I will write through them."

He took a note-book from his pocket, and at her dictation wrote down the name and address of a firm of solicitors in Lincoln's Inn. During the slight pause in their talk as he did this, Lauriston heard a sound upon the stairs, and looked up suddenly, convinced that some one had been listening.

"What is it?" asked Nouna.

"Somebody on the stairs," whispered he.

As he spoke, they both heard another light sound lower down; but when they looked into the dimly-lighted hall the eavesdropper had disappeared.

"It was not Rahas; he treads so that you can hear him," said Nouna.

"It was a woman, I am sure," said Lauriston.

"A woman," repeated Nouna. "And it was the end of a woman's dress, a long black dress, I saw in Fanah's room. I thought it must be a fancy, for when Rahas sent me to sleep to-day and made me see mamma she wore a long black dress."

"Rahas sent you to sleep! Why didn't you tell me?" asked Lauriston rather sharply.

"I had no time; I forgot about it."

"Tell me now all about it—at least, not here; come into the room."

Nouna stopped him, requiring to be kissed first. Then she let him open the sitting-room door, and the reason why Mrs. Ellis had not been disturbed by the proceedings outside was made manifest: the good lady was dozing in an armchair. She looked up with a start when they entered, and listened to Lauriston's explanations and apologies for appearing so late in a rather apathetic and somnolent manner. She awoke, however, into the fullest life of which her vegetable nature was capable, when Nouna began to describe to her visitor the adventure of the afternoon.

"You know," she said, "that Rahas has been teasing me to marry him. He wanted me to keep all the bracelets out of his warehouse that he lent me to wear, and I told him I could buy some for myself if I wanted them. And at last yesterday I told him I would stay no longer in the same house with him, and I went out with Mrs. Ellis and we engaged new apartments."

"I'm sure I had no wish to go away," broke in the elder

lady plaintively. "The people here are most obliging, the rooms are clean, and nobody could be more civil or more respectful than Mr. Rahas and his uncle, Monsieur Fanah." As the elder merchant spoke with a strong foreign accent, Mrs. Ellis thought him entitled to a French prefix to his name. "But there's no doing anything with Nouna when she's made up her mind, I regret to say."

At this point Nouna put her hand over her governess's mouth, and went on with her story.

"When Rahas learnt last night that I had taken this decisive step," she said with pompous, old-fashioned deliberateness, "he entreated me to change my determination. I said no, I would not be persecuted, and I should leave this house to-day. He declared that my mother would be much annoyed, to which I replied that he could not tell, as he did not know her. He then asked if I would stay if I could receive some sign from my mother that she wished me to remain. I answered that my mother's will was law to me, but that what he spoke of was impossible. And he smiled, and asked me if I would wait until this evening before leaving the house. I consented, and at eight o'clock he asked me to go down into his sitting-room, where I found you just now."

"You ought not to have gone," broke in Lauriston, in great excitement and irritation.

"I did not want to. I made Mammy Ellis go too. Didn't I, Mammy?"

"Mr. Lauriston must think me a very imperfect guardian for a young girl, if he imagines I would allow my charge to visit a gentleman's rooms alone," said Mrs. Ellis, drawing out the creases of her plump figure in a slow and impressive manner.

"Certainly, of course, I did not for a moment doubt——" murmured Lauriston, much relieved.

"Well," continued Nouna, "we went in, and the room was dark, with only one light, just as you saw it, and the screen was there, as it was just now. As Rahas talked to me, very slow and faint his voice seemed to grow, and then his eyes to grow very large and bright, so that they seemed like two great lamps, and I could see nothing else. And I got drowsy, and tried to put up my hands and to cry out that I was stifling—dying. But I could not; my hands were heavy and my voice would not come."

"And as for me," chimed in poor Mrs. Ellis, whose grey eyes grew round at the ghastly recollection, "when I turned round—for I was talking to Monsieur Fanah, little thinking of the heathenish doings which were taking place in my very presence—and heard the child cry 'Oh!' and saw her fall back on the cushions of the ottoman, I was so thunder-struck that for the first moment I couldn't have uttered one word if you had paid me for it. I was going to throw some water over her when that man Rahas said: 'She is not fainting; I have cast her down into a land of dreams.' And I said: 'Then, Mr. Rahas, you will please to cast her up again.' And when he looked at me, and saw the expression of my face," finished Mrs. Ellis triumphantly, "why he did so."

"And what did you dream?" Lauriston asked the girl.

"When the eyes of Rahas grew larger and larger they seemed to fade away and to leave a great light. And standing up against the light was my mother, with her own sweet smile upon her face and her grand bearing. (My mother is like an empress in her walk, in her movements, Mr. Lauriston.) And she put out her hand towards me and I thought she said 'Stay.' And then, before I could speak to her she faded away, and I felt a weight at my heart, and tried to sigh, and could not. And then a blank came, and next I heard the voice of Mammy Ellis, and I opened my eyes and saw her and Rahas."

"Perhaps," suggested Lauriston, who was by no means ready to acknowledge that another man had an influence, mesmeric or otherwise, over the girl he loved, "perhaps you really did see a figure that you took for that of your mother."

Nouna laughed scornfully at the notion. "As if I could mistake her! I heard her voice, I saw her smile. It was my mother."

Lauriston turned to Mrs. Ellis. "Was there no possibility of any one entering the room and leaving it quickly without your seeing her?"

"Oh no," said she at once. "Besides, Nouna fell with her head buried among the cushions, and her eyes were closed the whole time."

"Nouna," said Lauriston abruptly, after a pause, "you must not speak to that man again. The whole proceeding was a most disgraceful piece of trickery, such as no girl

ought to be subjected to. Mrs. Ellis, I am writing to-night to the Countess di Valdestillas, to ask her to permit my engagement with her daughter. Now that you know the interest I take in her, you will forgive my urging you to be careful that she obeys my earnest wish in this. I shall not wait for a letter to inform her that her daughter is not in a safe home: I shall go to-morrow to the Countess's solicitors, learn her address, and telegraph. And now I will say good-night, and I hope, Mrs. Ellis, you will forgive me this second nocturnal visit."

He shook hands with both ladies, and disregarding Nouna's undisguised anxiety to accompany him to the door, asked the elder lady if he could speak with her a few moments alone. With as much jealous indignation as if Mrs. Ellis had been eighteen and beautiful, Nouna flung herself into her American chair in a passion of tears as they left the room.

Lauriston opened his subject in a very low voice as soon as he and the governess were outside the door.

"You will need no assurance from me, madam," he began, "of the perfect loyalty of my motives, now you know that I intend to marry Nouna. But you will not be surprised at my anxiety to know something more about the family to which she belongs. As a matter of fact I have not even heard her surname. Have you any objection to tell me what you know?"

"Not the least," answered Mrs. Ellis, with perfect openness. "Her name is Nouna Weston. Her father I never knew, as he died when she was a little child. Her mother, now the Condesa di Valdestillas, is my ideal of a perfect gentlewoman. She is religious, perhaps a little bigoted even, very beautiful, and she has that distinction of manner which is more uncommon than beauty, to my idea. She is very generous and impulsive, and dotes upon her daughter. The Count, to whom she is devoted, I have only seen once; he accompanied his wife on a visit to the school. He is a small, thin, rather fallow gentleman, with very courteous manners, who gives one the idea of being rather selfish and domineering. The Countess dresses very quietly, almost perhaps what some people would call dowdily, as you know our Englishwomen of high rank so often do. But she must be well off, I think, for I know the principal of the school used to say she wished the parents of her other pupils were

all as punctual in their payments as the Countess ; and I must say, though she doesn't allow much pocket-money to Nouna, yet her treatment of me is most generous. It is really good-natured of me to wish the child happily married, for the income of an officer's widow who has no friends at court is by no means magnificent, as I dare say you know."

Nothing could be more satisfactory than this, as far as it went, and the authority was unimpeachable ; Mrs. Ellis being one of those simple, honest, unimaginative creatures who can neither invent a story nor tell an improbable one so as to make it appear probable. But of course the narrative offered no explanation of the puzzling events of the evening.

"And you believe the Countess to be still abroad?" he asked.

"Oh yes, if she were in England she would have been to see her daughter. She only pays flying visits to this country for that purpose."

"Oh yes." He could not get out of his head the idea that the woman of whom he had caught a glimpse at the window, whose dress Nouna had seen in the inner room down stairs, and who had certainly listened to their conversation on the landing, was Nouna's mother. But what on earth, if Mrs. Ellis's account were true, should she be doing paying secret visits to the house where her daughter was staying, and conspiring with a man of real or pretended mesmeric powers to play tricks on her?

It was very puzzling, but no suggestion Mrs. Ellis could offer was likely to throw light on the subject. He however asked her one or two more questions.

"Are there any ladies in this house besides yourselves? Or have you noticed any lady-visitors to the other inmates?"

"There is an old Frenchwoman who gives music lessons who has a room on the top-floor ; but I have never seen any other ladies go in or out," said Mrs. Ellis, rather surprised by the questions.

"And the gentlemen down stairs, Rahas and Fanah, are not married?"

"I have never heard that they were, and I'm sure I hope Mr. Rahas would never have the conscience to make up to Nouna if he had another wife in his own country. I have

always set my face against that, and have kept Madame di Valdestillas informed of his pretensions. For I've heard of these Mahometan gentlemen, that when they take a fancy to a European wife, they send all their other wives away, and have them back again within a month. So that I really feel quite thankful to you for appearing and sending all thoughts of Rahas out of the girl's flighty head."

"She never appeared to care for this black fellow, did she?" asked Lauriston jealously.

"Well, no, not in that way. Though she's a born coquette, Mr. Lauriston, I must warn you, and the man who marries her need have Job's virtues as well as his own."

"But she has a good heart," urged Lauriston, who felt that there was a measure of truth in the lady's warning.

"Oh yes, her heart's good enough. The only thing is that it must be for ever shifting its place. However, she may grow more like her mother in time."

"Good-night, Mrs. Ellis, it is very good of you to be so patient with me and my questions," said Lauriston, feeling that he was in no present need of further discouragement.

And he left her and ran down stairs. At the front door he was met by Rahas, who came with bland, unprepossessing smiles and courteous gestures, from his own apartments, to bid his guest good-night. Lauriston, who could scarcely treat him civilly since Nouna's story of the trick he had played on her, was suddenly struck with an idea. He turned to the young merchant in a more conciliatory manner.

"By the by," he said, "in your interesting account of your strange powers, which you attribute to the planets and I vaguely call mesmeric, you did not tell me one thing: can you call up in the mind of a person over whom you have that influence the image of anything with which that person is acquainted, or can you only raise the images which are familiar to yourself? In other words: is the picture you wish to present so strongly present to your own mind that by the mere force of will you can transfer it to the mind of another? or can you make the other mind work independently of yours?"

"I cannot do that," said Rahas, shaking his head. "I think I can explain my effect by saying that by the exercise of my will I deaden the forces of the mind I am at work upon, and leave it like the wet cloth before a magic

lantern ready to receive any picture I may choose to throw upon it."

"That is very interesting. I understand perfectly," said Lauriston heartily.

And after an exchange of lip-courtesies concerning their enjoyment of each other's society, Lauriston took his leave and started on his way back to Hounslow.

One thing was quite clear to him now. Rahas, on his own showing, had seen Nouna's mother at some time or other, or he would not have been able to call up her image in her daughter's mind. Was there some mysterious understanding between her and Rahas, who had, however, come in Nouna's path by the merest accident? George Lauriston's romantic love had certainly all the stimulus of mystery, and this stimulus was rendered considerably stronger by a discovery he made, walking quickly through Hyde Park, on his way to Victoria Station. He had been followed by a woman.

Just before he reached the gates at Hyde Park Corner he glanced back along the path and noticed a figure he had seen once or twice on his way. He made one quick step back towards her; but the woman, who was not very near, disappeared at once among the trees.

"I think I've had about adventures enough for one evening," said he to himself as he went through the gates instead of pursuing her. "I can find out what I must know through the lawyer to-morrow."

But when he left the train at Hounslow Barracks, he was almost sure that, among the alighting crowd of passengers, he saw the woman again.

CHAPTER VIII.

NEXT day, in the cruel but wholesome light of the morning, Lauriston took a grand review of all the circumstances of his short acquaintance with Nouna, and felt a growing conviction that he had made an astonishingly complete fool of himself. He had been foolish to visit the girl a second time, when he knew the effect her picturesque beauty and wayward charm had had on a first interview. He had been worse than foolish, he had been selfish, wicked, to make that wild confession, that abrupt offer of marriage to good little Ella, when he felt himself too weak to struggle unaided with the passion that possessed him. He had crowned his folly last night, when he pledged himself to marriage with a little wild girl, of somewhat mysterious parentage, passionate, capricious, in all probability madly extravagant, whom he hardly knew, whom he scarcely trusted, and who was certainly as deficient in every quality which goes to the making of the typical wife for an English gentleman as it is possible for a girl to be. And yet, in spite of all this, Lauriston felt no faintest pang of regret ; amazement, disgust with himself undoubtedly, but of repentance no trace.

For the tide of a first passionate love in a young, vigorous nature is strong enough to tear up scruples by the roots, to bear along prejudices in its waters like straws, to wash away the old landmarks in an onrush which is all fierce triumph and tempestuous joy.

To Lauriston, who had been accustomed, from a lofty standpoint of ambition and devotion to duty, to look down upon love as a gentle pastime which would amuse and occupy him when the first pangs of his hungry desire for distinction should be satisfied, the sudden revelation of some of its keen delights was an experience full of novel

excitement and charm. True at least to one principle while so much was suffered to go by the board, he did not for one moment waver in his resolution to marry Nouna. No staid English girl, whose mild passions would not develop until years after she had attained a full measure of self-control and self-restraint, would ever have for him the charm and the fascination of this little barbarian. Who pleased him best, and no other he would possess.

Having resolved therefore with open eyes upon doing a rash and hazardous thing, he gave a touch of heroism to his folly by setting about it as promptly and thoroughly as if it had been a wise one. As soon as parade was over he started for Lincoln's Inn, determined to find out what he could from the lawyers concerning Nouna's relations, and to write at once to her mother for the consent which he guessed would be readily accorded.

Messrs. Smith and Angelo, solicitors, had old-fashioned offices on a first floor, and there was a reassuring air of steady-going respectability about their whole surroundings, from the grim bare orderliness of their outer office to the cut of the coat of the middle-aged head clerk who courteously asked Lauriston which of the partners he wished to see. On learning that the visitor had no choice, the head clerk's opinion of him seemed to go down a little, and he said, with the air of a man who is not going to cast his pearls before swine—

“Then perhaps you had better see Mr. Smith.”

The visitor's name having been taken in to Mr. Smith, Lauriston heard it repeated in a happy, caressing voice, as if the announcement had been that of an old friend; and the next moment he was bowed into the presence of a tall, genial, jolly-looking man of about five-and-thirty, with black eyes, curly black hair, and a beautiful smile, who rose, came forward a step, shook his hand, and pressed him to take a chair with a warmth and good-humour which seemed to cast quite a radiance over the tiers of deed-boxes that lined the walls, with their victims' names inscribed on them in neat white letters.

“Well, I suppose it is nothing very serious that you want us to do for you,” said the lawyer, glancing from the card to his visitor's handsome face, and mentally deciding that there was a woman in it.

“It is very serious,” said Lauriston. “It is about a lady.”

The lawyer's smile became broader than ever, and his attitude a shade more confidential.

"Her name," continued Lauriston, "is Nouna Weston."

Mr. Smith's manner instantly changed; he drew himself up in his chair, and touched a hand-bell.

"I think, Mr. Lauriston," he said, with the smile very much reduced, "that you had better see Mr. Angelo." He told the boy who entered at this point to request Mr. Angelo to spare him a few minutes, and turned again to his visitor. "You see," he said, "Miss Weston's mother, the Countess di Valdestillas, is one of our oldest clients, so that to any business connected with her we like to give the entire collective wisdom of the firm."

At that moment a side-door, the upper part of which was of ground glass, opened, and an old gentleman, of rather impressive appearance and manner, came slowly in. He was of the middle height, slight and spare, with a face and head strikingly like those of the great Duke of Wellington, a resemblance which his old-fashioned built-up collar and stock proved to be carefully cultivated. He carried a gold-rimmed double eyeglass, which he constantly rubbed, during which process his grey short-sighted eyes would travel steadily round, seeing nothing but the subject which occupied his mind, helping to put the barrier of a stately reticence between him and his client. He bowed to Lauriston, with the air of a man who was entitled to be offended by this intrusion, but who would graciously consent to listen to a reasonable excuse; and Mr. Smith, with great deference, placed a chair for the great man, waited till he was seated, and explained the object of the young officer's visit.

"This gentleman, Mr. Angelo, has come to speak to us on some matter concerning Miss Nouna Weston."

The old lawyer stopped for a moment in the action of rubbing his glasses, and then bowed his head slowly. The younger partner glanced at Lauriston as a sign for him to speak.

"I am here, sir, to-day," began the young officer, feeling his confidence rise in this atmosphere of steady, reassuring, middle-class respectability, "as a suitor for the hand of Miss Nouna Weston. I have been referred by her guardian, Mrs. Ellis, to you, as I am told that it is only through you that I can communicate with her mother. I am anxious to make my wishes known to that lady with as little delay as possible."

Mr. Angelo put on his glasses and gave the young fellow a straight, piercing look. Mr. Smith, who seemed to be swallowed up, smile and all, in the more imposing presence of his partner, examined the features, not of his visitor, but of Mr. Angelo.

"You have not known the young lady long, I understand?" said the elder lawyer, in a mellow though somewhat feeble voice. "When Mrs. Ellis was last here she made no mention of you as, we being partly guardians to the young lady, she would certainly have done had you already appeared in the capacity of suitor."

"I have not known her three weeks," said the young man, blushing; "but if you know how she's living, in a lodging-house full of other people, where anybody can meet her on the stairs, you can't wonder I want to have a claim over her, so that I can get her into a better home."

"Then I understand—you see, Mr. Lauriston, I speak as a person of some authority in this matter—you have a home for her to which you wish to take her as quickly as possible."

"I am sorry to say I have not, sir. I am only a lieutenant now in the —th Hussars."

Mr. Angelo gave him a sudden, keen look. "Lord Florencecourt's regiment!" he said, as if struck by the circumstance.

Lauriston scarcely noticed the interruption. "Yes," continued he, "with scarcely anything but my pay. But I hope to get my step next year, or the year after at latest, when I could marry at once."

"Pray do not think me impertinent; this is to me a matter of business, and must be discussed plainly. Miss Weston has some extravagant notions, and may have given you the idea that her mother would continue to be indulgent should she marry. It is right to inform you that this is not the case. The Countess's income has suffered during the recent depression in rents, and—"

"I should never marry unless I could keep my wife," interrupted Lauriston abruptly. "I have been offered work on two military papers whenever I care to take it up, so that I shall not only be able to save, but to pay for Nouna's maintenance and education in some good school on the understanding that she is to marry me on leaving it. Anything that you or the Countess can wish to know about my family—"

The old lawyer raised his hand slowly. "—is easily known. You are a relation, I suppose, of the late Captain Lauriston of the — Dragon Guards?"

"I am his son."

"Ah! Your great-uncle, Sir Gordon Lauriston, was a client of my father's. You wish, I understand, to communicate with Madame di Valdestillas? Any letter that you leave in our care will be forwarded at once to her."

These words re-awoke Lauriston's remembrance of the mysterious lady who had followed him to his quarters the night before.

"As Madame di Valdestillas is now in England," he said quietly, "why should I not have her address?"

The old lawyer remained as unmoved as a mummy by this dashing stroke, but a sudden movement on the part of the less sophisticated Mr. Smith did not escape the young man's notice.

"If she is in England—which is very possible, as her movements are as uncertain as the winds—she has only just arrived, as we have not yet seen her. But if you will write to her under cover to me, I can promise you the letter will soon be delivered to her, as her first visit on coming to England is always to us."

"But she was at her daughter's house last night!"

"Indeed! Then why did you not speak to her yourself?"

Lauriston was disconcerted. The manner and voice of the old lawyer expressed such bland surprise, that he began to think he had discovered a mare's nest, and answered in a far less bold tone.

"I saw a lady whom I believed to be the Countess. I may have been mistaken—"

"You must have been mistaken," said the lawyer imperturbably. "The Countess di Valdestillas is not a person whose individuality admits of doubt. I will write to her, inform her of your visit, tell her that you would prefer to communicate directly with her, and ask her if she will authorise us to give you her address. We are forced to take this course, as, the Countess's business affairs being all in our hands, we are empowered to sift all her correspondence from England, that nothing but what is of real importance should come to her hands. The Countess has a dash of Eastern blood, like her daughter, and is, well, shall I say—not madly energetic."

There was nothing for Lauriston to do but to acquiesce in this arrangement and to take his leave, scarcely yet knowing whether he was satisfied or dissatisfied with his interview. As he passed out, however, condescended to by the senior, made much of by the junior partner as before, a clerk took in a telegram to the former. Lauriston had hardly gone two steps from the door of the outer office, when he heard the soft voice of the old gentleman calling to him from the door of his private room. He turned back, and with some appearance of mystery, and a rather less condescending tone than before, Mr. Angelo ushered him in, and offered him a chair before uttering a word.

"I thought I should like to say a few words to you in my private capacity, Mr. Lauriston," said he, when he had softly closed the door. "As a lawyer, speaking in the presence of my partner, as a member of the firm, I may have seemed to you somewhat dry and unsympathetic ; as a man, believe me, I should be glad to further an alliance between a member of such an honourable family as yours, and a young lady in whose welfare I take an interest."

Lauriston bowed in acknowledgment, with the conviction that it was the telegram he had just received which had produced such a softening effect on Mr. Angelo. He hastened to take advantage of it.

"You are very kind, sir. I love Nouna with all my heart, and my dearest wish is to make her my wife. But I should be glad if you would answer one question. The answer you give will make no difference to my course of action ; but it is right and necessary that I should understand Nouna's position. Am I right in supposing, as circumstances suggest, that Madame di Valdestillas had a secret in her past life, that—Nouna's father was not her husband ?"

Mr. Angelo's eyes wandered round the room in a reflective manner.

"May I ask what leads you to this supposition ?"

"The strange way in which she has been brought up, spoilt and yet neglected, the daughter of a woman of rank allowed to live in a lodging-house with a paid companion ; it is not the usual education of a lady, English or foreign."

"You are right. The circumstances are strange. You are an officer, the son of a man of known honour. You will of course regard any communication I make to you on this subject as strictly and inviolably secret."

"I hope you have no doubt of that."

"I have not. You understand that the information I am about to give you, you are bound in honour never to use, you are to regard as never having been heard?"

"I understand that perfectly."

"Well then, Nouna is the legitimately born daughter of an English gentleman. That, I think, is all you wish to know."

As his tone said very decidedly that this was all he meant to tell, Lauriston professed his entire contentment, and once more took his leave. Upon the whole he was not dissatisfied with the result of his visit to the lawyers. Nothing he had heard there was inconsistent with what he had already been told about the Condesa di Valdestillas, and he began to think that the romantic circumstances in which he had met Nouna had perhaps inclined him to make mountains of mystery out of molehills of eccentricity. The only thing which now seemed to baffle all attempts at explanation was the remarkable way in which Mr. Angelo had made the simple statement concerning Nouna's birth. As, however, it was impossible to learn the reason of this, Lauriston gave up trying to guess it, and assured of the prosperity of his suit, fell into a lover's dream, picturing to himself the joys of moulding this passionate pliable young creature, under the influence of his love, into an ideal wife, good as an English woman, fascinating as a French one, free from the narrowmindedness of the one and the frivolity of the other, and with a passionate warmth of feeling unknown to either. But as he recalled the grace of her movements, the delicate beauty of her face and form, her cooing voice and caressing gestures, the intoxication of his passion grew stronger than his efforts of reason and imagination. Why should he not marry her now, as she wished, as he longed to do? He could then educate her himself, guard her, as no schoolmistress, or guardian other than a husband could do, from all influences that were not noble, and pure, and good; whatever she might have done in imagination, in reality she had not lived in anything more like a palace than that one room, used for a few weeks, avowedly fitted up as a show-room, and furnished with treasures that were only borrowed. True, if he married her now, she would have to live in London lodgings still, and without the alleviations afforded by painted ceilings and silk-hung walls. But he would find for her head a softer pillow than any embroidered

cushion, and soothe her with a lullaby sweeter than the sound of any fountain that ever flowed.

And then in the midst of this fine frenzy, dull common sense put in a word, and showed him the reverse side of the medal ; a young husband with ambition checked, and study made impossible by growing debt and premature responsibility ; a young wife ill-dressed, ill-amused, with no companions of her own sex, perhaps a mother before she had left off being a child, her warm nature chilled by poverty and disappointment, her love for her husband changing into contempt or hatred. No, it was not to be thought of. He must find her a home where he could see her constantly, and keep her under the influence of his own thoughts, and of his own love, until the day when he could bring her to a little home such as an English lady of simple tastes could be happy in.

With an inspiration born of these thoughts, he remembered with a shock that he might have come westward third class on the underground, instead of in the well-appointed Forder hansom which he had chosen so carefully. He thrust up his umbrella, told the driver to stop, jumped out, paid him, and continued on foot from Chancery Lane, along Fleet Street, till he came to the office of a military paper the editor of whom, with the friendliness of editors to such writers as are not dependent upon writing, had asked him to contribute certain articles on a subject in which Lauriston was well-known to be proficient. He had sufficient acumen to let the editor think, when he expressed his readiness to undertake the work at once, that his object was fame rather than coin ; and having settled by what date the first instalment was to be ready, and ignored the matter of terms with a handsome indifference he did not feel, Lauriston left the office and returned to the West End on foot.

He dined that evening at his club with a couple of friends one of whom gave a rather startling turn to his beatific thoughts by an allusion to Clarence Massey's mad infatuation for some girl whom he had "picked up in a curiosity shop somewhere in the slums."

Lauriston made no comment, and did not betray by a look that the remark had an interest for him. The little Irishman had taken care not to indulge in his ravings over his unknown beauty in the presence of the comrade whom he had tricked. But the words of Rahas, on the preceding

evening, had given Lauriston a clue to his own visit to 36 Mary Street, and this startling reference to Massey's share in the matter strengthened his resolution to give that amorous and artful young gentleman a lesson.

Lauriston went home early, with the fixed intention of settling up this matter with as little delay as possible, and on arriving at his quarters he found his intention strengthened and the means of carrying it out provided, in a very unexpected manner.

As he was going up the stairs to his rooms, he was met by his soldier-servant, who told him that a lady had been waiting to see him for the last two hours. Lauriston hurried on in great excitement. Neither Nouna nor Mrs. Ellis knew his address, his sisters were in Scotland, and he had not, like some of his comrades, a circle of lively and easy-mannered feminine acquaintances. His thoughts flew directly to the woman who had followed him home the night before: perhaps the mystery was going to be solved after all; perhaps he should indeed see Nouna's mother.

Before he reached his rooms he heard voices; a few steps more and he could distinguish that of Clarence Massey; arrived at the door of the sitting-room, the soft tones of Nouna herself struck his ears.

"No," she was saying, "I shall not kiss you; Mr. Lauriston would be very angry with you for asking me."

"Bless you, you little beauty, no, he wouldn't. He'd be delighted to know you were enjoying yourself," answered Massey confidently.

Lauriston threw open the door just as Massey, who had been sitting on a stool a few paces from the sofa where Nouna half-sat, half-reclined, sprang up and seized the hand with which she was wearily supporting her head.

Nouna jumped up, clapping her hands with joy like a child, and ran towards Lauriston, who, livid, wet, and trembling, did not even look at her, but striding across to Massey without a word, lifted him up in his arms with the sullen fury of an enraged bear, and carrying him to the door, which he opened with a kick, flung him pell-mell, anyhow, like a heap of soiled clothes against the wall, as far along the corridor as he could throw him. Then slamming the door to work off the remains of his rage, he turned to the frightened girl, who had fallen on her knees and was clinging about his feet.

CHAPTER IX.

WHEN George Lauriston, having relieved his feelings by his summary treatment of Massey and closed the door upon the young Irishman's groans and voluble remonstrances, turned his attention to Nouna, he was seized with remorse at having given such free rein to his anger, when he saw what a strong effect it had upon the girl. She persisted in crouching on the ground at his feet like a dog that has been whipped, and when he stooped down and laid his hands upon her, gently telling her to get up and speak to him, she only murmured, "Don't hurt me. I haven't done anything wrong," and tied herself up with extraordinary suppleness into a sort of knot, which George surveyed helplessly, not knowing well how to handle this extraordinary phenomenon. At last it occurred to him that this exaggerated fear could be nothing but one of her elfish tricks, and he began to laugh uneasily in the hope that this would afford a key to the situation.

On hearing his puzzled "Ha, ha!" Nouna did indeed uncurl herself and look up at him; but it was with a timid and bewildered expression. He, however, seizing his opportunity, swooped down, passed his arms under her, and lifting her bodily from the floor, carried her over to the sofa, placed her upon it, and sat down beside her.

"And now, little one, tell me what is the matter with you, and why and how you came here."

Instead of answering, she looked at him steadily, with a solemn and penetrating expression. Angry as he still felt, anxious as he was to know the reason of her unexpected coming, her appearance was so comical that George could not help smiling as he looked at her. She wore again the shot silk frock in which he had seen her on his second visit

to Mary Street ; a deep, purple embroidered fez made a Romeo-like covering for her short and curly dark hair ; while a sop thrown to conventionality in the shape of a small black-beaded mantle only brought into greater prominence the eccentricity it was meant to disguise. She had either forgotten or not thought it necessary to exchange her open-work pink silk stockings and embroidered scarlet morocco slippers for foot-gear less startling and picturesque ; her gloves, if she had worn any, she had long ago thrown aside, and George could not help acknowledging, as he looked at her, that it would need an intelligence stronger than poor Massey's to discover in this remarkable guise the carefully brought-up young English lady whom alone his code taught him to respect. As this thought came into his mind, George's expression changed, and grew gloomy and sad. The young girl was still watching him narrowly.

"Are you often—so?" she asked, with a pause before the last word, and a mysterious emphasis upon it.

"What do you mean, Nouna?"

"So full of anger that your face grows all white and grey, and your mouth like a straight line, and you look as if you would kill the person that offends you."

And she shuddered and drew away from him again. George took one of her hands very gently in his.

"No, Nouna, I am very seldom angry like that. It is only when any one does something which seems to me very wrong."

"Oh." This explanation did not seem so re-assuring to the young lady as it ought to have been. "You were listening at the door all the time then?" she said, after a pause, not so much in fear as in timid respect.

"No," said he vehemently, growing hot at the suggestion. "Gentlemen don't listen at doors."

"Don't they?" said she incredulously. "Why not?"

"It is mean, sneaking, bad form altogether."

"Is it? Then how do you find out things? Ah, you would pay a servant, perhaps, to do all that for you?"

George grew scarlet and drew his hands away from her, half in indignation, half in horror.

"Nouna!" he exclaimed, "where on earth did you pick up these awful ideas? To pay a servant to play the spy is the most rascally thing a man could do! A man who did it would deserve to be kicked."

"Would he? Then what would he do if he thought his wife deceived him? Wouldn't he mind?"

George sprang up to his feet, and took a few turns about the room. He was appalled by this fearful perversion of mind, by this terrible candour, and he thought with a shudder of Rahas' statement that the women of the East have no souls. How should he set to work to make her see things with his eyes? He glanced at her, and saw that she had changed her attitude; curling her feet up under her, and leaning her head on her hand, she sat quite still, nothing moving but her eyes, watching him. He came back, knelt before her, and looked into her face.

"In England, Nouna," he said very gently, "when a man wants a wife, he chooses a girl whom he believes to be so good, so true, so noble that he couldn't possibly think she would do anything that wasn't right. And he loves her with all his heart, and never thinks of anybody but her, and spends all his time trying to make her happy. So he never thinks about such a dreadful thing as her deceiving him, because, you see, she couldn't, unless she was very wicked, treat a man badly when he was so good to her."

"Then what Sundran says is all wrong."

"Who is Sundran?"

"My servant, my ayah. She says that Englishmen love other women besides their wife, who is only like the chief wife in our country, and that Englishwomen are not so good as Indian ladies, because they are not shut up."

"Sundran must be sent away. She tells you falsehoods," said George indignantly.

"She shall not be sent away," retorted Nouna, flashing out at once into passion. "She loves me. It is she who tells me of the land where I was born, who sings me my Indian songs, and tells me the tales of my own country. She shall not go."

George did not press the point, though he made an inward vow to remove this most noxious influence as soon as he had authority over the wayward creature before him.

"And doesn't some one else love you, Nouna?" he asked reproachfully, looking into her flashing eyes; "some one whom you are treating very cruelly this evening?"

The appeal melted her at once, or rather it turned the passion of anger into a passion of affection. She threw her

arms round his neck and fervently kissed his mouth, nestling her red lips under his moustache, and scratching his left ear fearfully with the beadwork on her mantle.

"I am not cruel, I love you," she said earnestly. "I came here to-night because I could not live without seeing you again ; only I will not marry you ; I have made up my mind to that."

"But why, Nouna, why?" asked poor George in consternation.

"We are not of the same race ; we should not be happy ; Rahas is right. If I made you angry, you would look as you did to-night, and you would kill me."

"But Nouna, I am not a savage ; I don't get angry over little things. And I should never be angry with you."

"I don't know. You say you would not have me watched, you would trust me. Well, I would rather be watched, then I should feel safe. But if I always did just as I felt, I should some day make you angry, I know. I am not like your English girls—the girls at the school, who always know what they are going to do. Something comes up here,"—and she put her hands over her heart—"and then it mounts up there,"—joining her fingers over her head—"and says, 'Nouna, love ; Nouna, hate ; Nouna, be sweet and gentle ;' or 'Nouna, be proud and distant.' And I go just as the little voice guides. Well, that is not English!"

"You are impulsive, darling, that's all. If you love me truly, the little voice will always tell you to do what I wish."

"Will it? But I am afraid. I tell you I would rather kill myself than have you look at me as you looked at the little curly-haired man to-night. Why did you hate him so?"

"When I came in he was trying to kiss you."

"But I would not have let him."

"No, of course not. That is because you are good and true to me, whom you love."

"Is it? I did not know it was that. I only knew that he was small and ugly, and I did not like him."

"No ; you must not like any man but me."

"Ah, then you had better shut me up."

"Well, so I will, my darling. I will shut you up in my heart so close that you shall have no eyes for any one but me."

And with a great impulse of tenderness for the little dark-eyed thing who was drinking in new impressions of life and morals with so much solemn perplexity, he flung his arm round her and buried his head in the folds of her dress.

"You will scratch your beautiful face," said she solicitously, removing the beaded mantle, and ruffling up his hair with light fingers. "How can Rahas say you are not handsome? You are like Brahma himself when he rides in his sun-chariot!" she said with loyal intention if with confused lore.

The name of Rahas, used thus for the second time, roused George from the intoxicating oblivion of outside things into which this unexpected interview with the girl he loved had thrown him.

"Rahas!" he repeated, raising his head sharply. "You haven't seen him again to-day?"

"Now you are going to be angry," exclaimed the girl shrinking.

"No, my darling, I am not," said George in a most gentle tone. "But if I am to watch over and protect you, I must keep you out of the way of men like Rahas. When did you see him? What did he say to you?"

"Well, I saw him this evening, just before I came here. Mrs. Ellis and I had just finished dinner. I had been very quiet and good all day, writing a long letter to mamma, telling her how handsome you were, and how I would never look with love on the face of any other man, if only she would give me her permission to love you. And I was tired of sitting still, and the air was hot, and Mammy Ellis was sleepy. So I opened the door, and she said there was a draught, and I must shut it. And I could not bear the heat, so I did shut it, with myself outside. And I went into the next room—the one where I had pulled down the hangings; and I was so lonely and sad and weary that I was sorry I had pulled them down, and I began to cry and tried to nail up the long trails of silk to the wall again; and when I found I could not, I sat down and cried again; and then I looked up and I saw Rahas in the room watching me like a tiger. And I sprang up; but he came to me with his eyes shining, and fell at my feet and told me a lot of strange things that I forget."

"What things? What did he tell you?" asked George, trying to keep calm.

"Must I remember them? He frightened me; I do not want to remember them."

"Try, my darling."

"He said he loved me, and that I must love him, for the planets said so, and had given him an influence over me which I could not resist. He said he had tried to conquer himself, and had consented to give me up; but his love was too strong, and I must forget you—that you were hard and cold. When he said that I flew into a passion, and told him I hated him and should marry you. And I threw open the window and told him if he came near me I would shriek with all my strength. And so he had to grow quieter; and then he said he knew strange things about me. I myself did not know, and that you never meant to marry me, that you looked upon me as a little girl to play with, and would marry a staid English lady. And I burst out crying again, and said that would make no difference to him, for I should go away and perhaps drown myself. Then he was very quiet for a long time, and he presently spoke in oh! such a low voice, with a smile on his face that was not sweet and kind, but horrible. He told me if I wanted you to marry me I had better go to your rooms at once and tell you not to forget I loved you, or else that you would see some other lady and perhaps marry her before I could see you again. So I sprang up at once, and he told me where you lived, and I slipped into my own room and put on my mantle, and told Sundran not to say where I was gone, and I would be back soon. Then Rahas put me into a cab, and told me at the last to be sure and wait till I saw you. And I thanked him and said, 'Be sure I will.' And so I came; and it was a long way, and I am tired. Why do you look like that? Why are you angry? Did you not want me to come? Rahas said you would be glad."

"The infernal scoundrel!" burst out George, who had been listening to this recital in almost incredulous horror.

Nouna got on to her feet, and looked at him with a puzzled inquiring face.

"Did he know you would be angry then?" she asked in a low voice. "I remember he said I should be less proud when I came back."

With a strong effort George controlled himself, lest an incautious word should give any inkling of the rascal's meaning to the girl's mind. He drew forward an arm-chair

and invited her to take it with the manner he would have used to a princess. In seating herself she held up her arms towards him, but he would not touch her. He sat down gravely a little way off as he said :

"You will not go back to Mary Street at all, Nouna."

"No? Shall I stay here with you?"

"Not here, dear. These are bachelor's quarters. But you will stay after Friday in apartments that I shall take for you."

"Why after Friday?"

"Because I cannot marry you before then."

"Marry me! You said you were not going to marry me for two years!"

"You see I've changed my mind."

"Since last night?"

"Since an hour ago, since I found you here."

She sprang up and flung her arms about him, with kisses, and caresses, and incoherent words.

"Then you are not angry with me for coming. Oh, I'm so glad, I'm so glad I came. I don't know what to do, I'm so happy. It seemed so dreadful to have to wait two years, two years always away from you. For I never felt like this before, as if my heart would break, or would burn my breast if I was away from you. That is love, isn't it? Kiss me, kiss me, don't be so cold. Don't you love me? Why are you going to marry me if you do not love me?"

She pushed herself suddenly away from him, keeping her hands on his shoulders and devouring his face with an eager scrutiny. His dark eyes were very bright, and his skin, burnt red and brown like that of most young Englishmen in summer time, was a deeper colour than ever with excitement. But his forehead was puckered into lines and wrinkles, and his mouth was closed in a firm straight line, a fact which Nouna discovered for herself by brushing up his moustache with a quick and unexpected movement.

"You are thinking!" she cried indignantly. "When I tell you of my love you are full of nothing but your thoughts. When I am your wife I will not let you think."

This last passionate sentence struck George with the ominous force of a prophecy. He got up and lifted the girl playfully right above his head, however, while he spoke in grave tones, the tenderness of which was unmistakable. "When two people love each other, little one, one of the

two at least always has to think. And when you are my wife you will have to let me do as I please, just as now you have to let me hold you in the air until it is my good pleasure to put you down."

But as he spoke the little creature, who had been trying in vain with her weak fingers to undo the clasp of his strong ones on her waist, suddenly ceased to struggle and lay limp and heavy on his hands, her head and limbs hanging loose, and her cap falling to the ground. George let her down and placed her on the sofa in consternation, blaming himself for ignoring the fragility of the tiny thing. There she lay just as he placed her, as still as the dead. No sooner, however, had he rushed into his bedroom, returning with a glass of water which he began nervously to sprinkle on her still face, than she opened her eyes with a sly and elfish delight, and began to curl up with mischievous laughter. George fell back with a sick feeling which was not all relief at finding she was less fragile than he had supposed. He had challenged her to take his playful action as an allegory, and she had had the wit to accept and continue it. When their two wills should clash she would obtain by fraud what she could not get by force. It was at least a fair warning. He was angry with her and he got up from his knees without speaking, without looking at the laughing girl. Nouna understood, and in a moment all merriment had died from her face; she was clinging to his arm, entreating him passionately to forgive her; she was a wicked, ungrateful girl; she had only meant to tease him, to see if he would mind if she were ill; she would obey him, she would do whatever he wished her to do; she would throw herself out of the window if he would not turn and kiss her.

So he turned, of course, and the kiss of peace was given; but George had had a chill in the height of his passion, and even while he passed his hand over her soft hair and made her pretty, low-voiced love-speeches, his mind was full of practical matters concerning her lodging for the three nights to be passed before he could possibly marry her, and other details connected with this step.

"Where was this school you lived at before you came to London with Mrs. Ellis, Nouna?" he asked suddenly.

"School! It wasn't quite a school. There was only six of us, and we all had rooms apart and our own servants," said Nouna.

“Well, but where was it?”

“It was at Clifton. But why—”

“Clifton! That’s no use,” said George to himself. Then he continued aloud, “Now, Nouna, will you be a good child and stay quietly where I take you to-night?”

“Yes,” said she, nodding like a child, “if you come too.”

“I’ll take you there to-night, and I’ll come and see you quite early in the morning. It is to the house of an old servant in our family who now lets part of her house in apartments. She will be very kind to you, I know.”

“But you won’t leave me there all alone—without Sundran or anybody?”

“I won’t leave you until I see you are quite happy and comfortable there, and if you don’t like the place and the people I won’t leave you there at all.”

Without giving her time for further objections, George brought her a comb, which she kissed because it was his and proceeded to pass through her short, thick hair in a very helpless and unaccustomed fashion; at last, coming to a decided knot, she stamped her foot and, leaving the comb in her hair, presented her head to George, who placed her again in the armchair and reverently and laboriously set to work on the soft curly tangle. He grew very hot over the occupation, which was new to him, and began to understand why hairdressers are generally of the abler sex. By the time he had reduced the pretty wavy hair to order, and admired its soft silkiness by the light of the candle he had set burning, Nouna had added to his difficulties by falling, like a tired kitten, fast asleep. He called to her gently two or three times, and was at last forced to come to the conclusion that she did not mean to wake up. After a moment’s reflection he resolved to take advantage of the circumstance. It was getting very late, and if he were to insist on rousing her, she might have another little scene in store for him before she would consent to go. So he put on her cap, picked up her gloves and put them in his pocket, and lifting her in his arms, wrapped the beaded mantle about her and carried her down stairs, during which proceeding she patted his cheek sleepily but really seemed only half awake. He passed nobody but the sentry, who could scarcely conceal his surprise on finding which of the

young officers it was who was engaged in such an evident "lark." He was just in time to catch a train to Victoria, and until they arrived there Nouna declined to wake up. Outside the station, George got with his sleepy charge into a hansom and, after giving the driver an address in a street at Brompton, occupied himself, as his companion remained motionless except that as he propped her in the corner she promptly fell back against him, in getting her little hands into her gloves. He was very tenderly busy with the first, when a voice from the depths of his shoulders surprised him.

"Wrong hand!"

"Hallo! So you're awake, are you, little one? Come, lift up your head; I want to put you to rights before we get there."

"No, no, I don't want to get there," said she, stretching up her arm across his breast, "I want to drive about like this all night with you."

"But we can't do that, Nouna."

"Why not?"

"Well, you'd catch cold—"

"No, I shouldn't; I'm quite warm; feel me."

"And—and it wouldn't be considered right."

"Now you're not going to talk as Mrs. Somers used to talk, are you?" asked Nouna warningly. "Because if you do I shall hate you just as I used to hate her, and I shall want to get away from you just as I used from her."

"But Nouna, some one must tell you what's right and what's wrong, and who is to do it if you won't let me whom you say you love?"

"Don't say I only *say* it," cried she, nestling up to him with pleading reproach. "Go on, go on lecturing me; but keep your hand so on my shoulder all the time."

And his lecture had to die away into endearing words, and when the hansom stopped, George found it difficult to resist the temptation, urged upon him in a soft whisper by his companion, to tell the cabman to "drive on." But he nerved himself to a sense of duty and propriety, jumped out and rang the bell of a well-kept house, at the door of which appeared a neat servant who informed him that Miss Glass was at home.

Miss Glass was a woman of five and forty, with an honest

fresh-coloured face, who insisted on kissing George because she had nursed him when he was a baby, and who willingly consented to do all she could for his bride-elect. The eccentric appearance of that lady when she was brought inside the house seemed somewhat to shock her ideas of propriety ; but when, after George had bidden her good-night and gone to the door, the poor child ran out after him and entreated him not to leave her—she was so lonely—she had never been all by herself among strangers before—Miss Glass put her arms round the girl in very kindly fashion, and soothed her into some sort of despondent and melancholy resignation.

“You'll come early, won't you?” Nouna cried from the doorstep in heart-broken tones. “If you don't come before ten I shall come to the barracks after you.”

George assured her that he would come before breakfast, and drove off, excited by the rapidity with which this important step of marriage was forcing itself upon him. He had surprised himself lately by developing an infinite capacity for doing rash things, but he was saved by his native obstinacy from the weakness of regretting them ; therefore, although he acknowledged to himself that this headlong plunge into matrimony was the rashest act of all, and that his chances of domestic happiness were about the same as if he had decided to unite himself for life to a Cherokee squaw, he was resolved in dare-devil fashion to stick to his colours and make the best of it, and this state of mind left him calm enough to think of a little act of kind consideration towards poor Mrs. Ellis who, he knew, must by this time be half crazy with anxiety about her charge. So he drove to Mary Street, and after satisfying the governess that Nouna was safe, though he declined, for fear of Rahas, to give her address, he went down stairs and knocked at the door of the Oriental merchant's apartments. The grey-haired Fanah opened it, however, and with a real or affected ignorance of English, explained, chiefly by gestures and incoherent noises that his nephew was “gone away.” So that George, who was burning for some short and sharp vengeance, he hardly knew what, upon Rahas for his infamous advice to Nouna, was forced to retire with that praiseworthy wish unsatisfied.

Scarcely, however, had the old merchant, with a low bow, closed the door of his apartments, when a little lamp, borne

by a figure in white, cast a feeble light upon the walls above, which shifted rapidly downwards until it was flashed in George's eyes by the bearer, who proved to be no other than Nouna's Indian servant Sundran. The young man started when he saw the bronze-coloured face peering up into his. It was a most unprepossessing countenance, bearing the impress of mean passions and low cunning, which not even the brown dog's eyes, full of affection and a certain sagacity, could redeem. The woman might have been of any age between thirty-five and fifty, though the supple agility of her movements seemed to prove that the wrinkles and lines in her dark face were premature. She looked up into Lauriston's face with eager anxiety.

"Missee, little missee, my mistress, where is she?" she asked in a whisper.

"She's all right, quite safe; I came to tell Mrs. Ellis so."

"But me want to see her, she not sleep till I come to her and sing and tell her the old stories. Take me to her, sahib, take me, and Sundran love you very dear."

"I can't do that, Sundran; she is a long way from here. But she is quite safe. I am going to marry her, so you may be quite sure she is safe. Mrs. Ellis trusts me, so you can."

"But, sahib, Missee Ellis not know her so long as me. I come with her from her country with the Mammee Countess, her mother. She always have me, she love her old nurse. Sahib, take me to her."

But George was looking upon the woman with more and more distaste. Hers was the pernicious influence which, working by the spells of early association, of wild fable, of romantic devotion, had filled Nouna's young mind with its prejudices, had excited her imagination by its dangerous pictures, and had made her blind and deaf to all the better influences around her.

"I cannot indeed," he said gravely. "I am going straight back to my own rooms now. It would take me another hour to drive you first to the house where she is staying, and by that time your mistress would be fast asleep."

The woman noticed the increased coldness of his tone, and recognised the uselessness of further entreaty. She tried another tack.

"Sahib," she whispered lower than ever, in a wheedling

tone, with a glance all round the hall and a particularly careful scrutiny, by the light of the lamp, of the chinks of the doors, "if you take me to Missee Nuna, if you tell me where she is, I take you to Sahib Rahas, I tell you where he is."

George started, and the offer confirmed him in his resolution to have nothing to do with this woman. He thought it proved conclusively that she had been bought by Rahas, but that she was willing to betray him if she could get her price; and though he did her the justice to believe in the sincerity of her devotion to her young mistress, he knew how much more harm than good it was likely to do his poor little *fiancée*. As he repeated that it was impossible for him to comply with her request, the dark face of the Indian woman grew hideous with baffled passion. She retreated a few paces and showed her teeth at him like an angry ape; then twirling her lamp twice round her head with some muttered, inarticulate words, as if she were repeating an incantation, she turned her back upon him and slunk stealthily up stairs like a wild animal thwarted in a search for its young.

George left the house with shuddering thankfulness that Nouna had escaped from her perilous associations. "Marriage, thank heaven," thought he, "works such changes in a woman that it will drive them all out of her head and fill her heart and mind with new thoughts and feelings."

And of course he forgot that marriage can work changes in a man too.

CHAPTER X.

THE next morning, before he was up, George Lauriston was surprised by an apparition in a dressing-gown, with a black eye and a strip of sticking-plaister across its upper lip. It proved to be Clarence Massey, who came up to his bedside to offer to smoke the pipe of peace while yet the soft influence of slumber might be supposed to mollify any desire for vengeance which might haply be still burning in his comrade's breast. As a matter of fact, George had, before retiring to rest the night before, regretted his violence to the little Irish lad, and was ready to meet him more than half-way. So that when Massey humbly made a clean breast of the trick he had played, valiantly omitting all mention of Dicky Wood's share in it, and apologised for his intrusion into Lauriston's quarters the evening before, the latter held out his hand from the bed and told him not to think any more about it.

"I'm awfully sorry I was so rough with you, old chap," said he. "It was all a misunderstanding from beginning to end. Nouna is so young, and knows so little of the world, that she hasn't dignity enough yet to awe an Irishman. She'll know better when she's married; and if you don't come to our wedding, at least you must be the first to congratulate us afterwards, Massey, since it was you who brought about our first meeting."

But Massey's jaw had dropped.

"Wedding! You don't really mean you're going to marry her, Lauriston!" he cried in too evident consternation.

"Certainly I mean it; why not?" said George, very quietly, though he had suddenly grown thoroughly awake.

"Oh, no reason, of course. I beg your pardon. I was

only surprised because we hadn't heard anything about it, you know."

"There is no reason why the whole regiment should know all one's affairs," said George quickly. "And look here, Massey, don't go and talk about it, there's a good fellow. You know very well how they all begin to croak if a man marries young, and as I don't want my wife to meet any of them before it's necessary, I'd rather they didn't even hear of it till we've had time to look about us," ended George, who had a nervous dread of the effect the neighbourhood of a pretty woman who was somebody else's wife had upon several of his fellow-officers.

Massey nodded intelligently two or three times in the course of this speech, but at the end of it he hum'd and ha'd rather dubiously and at last spoke out.

"Well, you see, Lauriston, of course I won't say a word, but the fact is something about it has got to the Colonel's ears already."

"What!" cried George, jumping up.

"Yes. You see, when you deposited me on the floor of the corridor outside here last night, neither you nor I took the matter in the quiet and gentlemanly manner we ought to have done. In fact, we made such a row that rumours of it came to the Colonel's ears, and hearing your name and mine mixed up in it, he sent for me and asked me about it. And—and you see, Laurie, old chap, I didn't know all you have just told me, and—"

"By Heaven!" said George in a low voice, "you made him think—"

"I give you my word, old man, I didn't *make* him think anything. But I couldn't help what he did think. When he heard there was a girl mixed up in it—a sort of creole, I think I said—he went off like soda-water in hot weather, and there was no getting a word in edgeways after that. He asked me finally what the d— I was standing there for like a moonstruck idiot, or a stuck pig, or a something I didn't exactly catch. For as soon as he showed by his first words that my presence was no longer soothing, I saluted and scuttled away, as one express journey through the air in the course of an evening is enough for anybody. I believe he sent up to your rooms, but you had gone out by that time."

George listened to this account very gloomily, as the

Colonel was the very last person he wished to know anything about his marriage until it was an accomplished fact. He dreaded a summons from Lord Florencemourt ; for the next three days he felt a nervous quaking of the heart whenever he was in the neighbourhood of the autocratic little officer. But for some unexplained reason he was not called upon to give an account of himself, and instead, the Colonel seemed to mark his displeasure by the much more welcome means of cold reserve towards him.

In the meantime George had a busy day of it. He dismissed Massey pledged to secrecy on the subject of the marriage and likewise to eternal friendship with himself, called on Nouna, whom he found reconciled to her new abode by means of a kitten and a preliminary lesson in the art of shelling peas. He then went up to the City, saw Mr. Angelo, told him enough of the occurrences of the preceding evening to show him how needful it was that the young girl should find immediately some more efficient protector than the somnolent and stolid Mrs. Ellis, and declared his wish to marry her at once. Mr. Angelo concurred perfectly in all that he said, and only made one stipulation, namely, that George should wait until Madame di Valdestillas's consent could be got to this decisive step.

"I have not the least doubt of her consent, Mr. Lauriston," said he. "And as I learnt yesterday, by telegraphing to her last address, that she and her husband are now in Paris, on their way to Spa, you will not have long to wait for her answer. She is accustomed to act a good deal by my advice, and I will say about you enough to turn the scale. She has great faith in my judgment, as she may well have where she is concerned, for, although some of her actions may seem eccentric to us methodical Europeans, she has a most generous and noble nature, and she can always command whatever knowledge and service my partner and I can put at her disposal. But I could not allow this hasty marriage to take place without her full consent. To begin with, it would not be legal, as her daughter is not yet sixteen."

There was nothing for George Lauriston to do therefore, but to wait, and in the meantime to write a long and earnest letter to the Countess, which he entrusted to her lawyers, without troubling further for her address. During the next two days he spent a great deal of his time with

Nouna, whom he took to the South Kensington Museum and to the Zoological Gardens, first stopping with her at different shops in Regent Street, where he provided her with boots, gloves and a hat. She gave a great deal of trouble in all the shops, being quite unable to fix her attention on the subject in hand in her delight at being able to run about and examine all the pretty things; but she charmed the attendants, both men and girls, who allowed her to try on every scarf and bonnet and wrap that suited her fancy, and brought her a cup of tea, when, on hearing two of the girls speak about going to tea, she made a request for one. When, however, her exuberance of spirits had calmed down a little, she chose without an instant's hesitation the bonnet which suited her best, a puckered ivory-silk hood-like headgear, meant for a child, a pair of long silk gloves of the same shade, which she gathered up in wrinkles on her arms, and a china crape shawl that matched exactly with them, which she arranged most picturesquely about her shoulders, after flinging down on the ground the beaded mantle she had previously worn.

This proceeding, which caused George some consternation, she accomplished with a series of delighted chuckles.

"Ah, ah! That's the thing Mammy Ellis got for me! I wish she could see it now," she murmured, casting a look of scorn and hatred at the rejected garment, which was of the kind middle-aged ladies call "handsome" and "lady-like." And when one of the smiling assistants picked it up and asked for her address that she might send it home, she shook her head disdainfully and said they could keep it, she did not want it sent home. But George, with a serious face, mindful of the expense of ladies' dress, which began to seem unsuspectingly appalling, said she might be cold presently, and insisted on carrying the prickly bristling mantle, which he regarded with all reverence as having been worn by her, over his arm.

It seemed to him monstrous that the bill for these few trifling things should have come to three pounds fifteen shillings and elevenpence halfpenny—a sum which, when paid, left him scarcely enough for her boots and the cabs to and from the Zoo. For she chose her foot-gear in the same half-royal, half-mad way, turning over a pile of boots and shoes with quick fingers, and running round to inspect the contents of the show-cases until she discovered a pair of

tiny, thin walking-shoes with slender, tapering heels, which stood all by themselves under glass in the middle of the shop. She was told they were only for show, and too small for wear.

"But they are large enough for me," she said, thrusting forward a small, velvet-shod foot imperiously. "I will not wear ugly shoes because your Englishwomen have ugly feet."

And nothing would satisfy her but to try them on, when, to the surprise of the shopkeeper and the consternation of the unhappy purse-bearer, they proved to fit her perfectly and in every respect to suit her taste. She performed a little fancy dance before the glass to demonstrate their beauty and the fact that they were easy, and George brought down his fortune to a couple of half-crowns and some coppers by the act of paying for them.

"Weren't there any boots then among the things I brought from Mary Street this morning, Nouna?" he asked diffidently.

"Oh yes, a few old ploughmen's things—'strong walking-boots,' as Mrs. Ellis calls them," said she carelessly; "but of course I could not come out with *you* in *those*. You know Mrs. Ellis never will take me with her to buy my things. This is the very first time I have ever bought anything for myself, and oh! I do like it."

George had no doubt of that: she was absolutely trembling with joyous excitement. But Mrs. Ellis's judgment seemed to him a less mean thing than it had seemed before. The girl was so happy, however, that it was impossible not to sympathise a little with her pleasure; and when they left the shop and got again into the hansom, and she said, with an ardent squeeze of his hand, "Oh, I do like shopping with you! I'll go shopping with you whenever you like!" he felt a passionate longing to gather the little butterfly thing up into his arms; and instead of telling her that about a week of this indulgence would land him in the Bankruptcy Court, he told her in a husky whisper that he would have some work in a few days, and when the money for it came she should have it to do what she liked with, "and every penny I can ever earn in all my life, my darling," he added close to her ear. Whereupon she was with difficulty restrained from embracing him opposite Peter Robinson's.

This was the day they went to the Zoo, where Nouna, looking quaintly lovely in her hastily-chosen toilette, skipped

and frolicked about so that George felt like her grandfather, fed the big bear with buns until even he refused to climb up his pole for them any longer, and excited a mild "sensation" in the school-children and quiet visitors. Not one cage, not one path among the Gardens, would she leave unvisited. George might go home if he pleased—she could find her way back ; but she would drink her pleasure to the dregs, ride the elephant and the camels, lunch frugally and hastily at the little restaurant, give nuts to the monkeys and biscuits to the Wapiti deer, pat the seals and shudder at the serpents, till the sun went down and it was time for the closing of the Gardens. By that time the new shoes had begun to feel a little stiff, the white gloves to look more than a little soiled, and at last poor tired Nouna burst into tears on discovering a long rent in the pretty crape shawl.

"It was that nasty monkey, the one with the long ta-a-il," she sobbed. "Oh, George, isn't there time to go back and beat him?"

"No, I'm afraid not, darling," said George, rearranging the shawl as best he could to hide the slit. "And he didn't know any better, poor thing."

"But I ought to know better than to be such a baby," said she suddenly, with great solemnity, stopping her tears. "I shall be different when I'm married," she went on, very earnestly, "for married women never cry, do they? They have something else to do. I'm afraid I shall not make a very good wife at first, George," she said, giving herself up to the subject with as much intensity as she had just devoted to the animals, though her voice was tired now and her footsteps very slow. "I was talking it over with Miss Glass this morning, and she told me many things which I meant to write down, only I forgot : how I must find out what you like and what you dislike ; she says many a husband's love is lost by little things such as forgetting pickles, and giving him hare without—without—I don't remember what. But I'll ask her again. I mean to be a good wife, much better than people think, and please mamma—and—let me rest a little."

It was a long way across the park to the nearest point where they could get a cab, and although George half carried her for the greater part of the distance, she fell into his arms with a little exhausted, sobbing cry when at last they got into a hansom, and before they had driven half a

mile she was fast asleep. He sat looking down at the red, parted lips, the soft young cheeks, the sweeping eyelashes that defined the voluptuous curve of her long eyelids, with the thoughtfulness of the guardian mingling with the yearning tenderness of the lover. During the long, bright day he had just spent with her it had begun to dawn upon him that some of his dreams of an ideal marriage with this fascinating, tiresome, irresponsible child-woman were very unsubstantial things. If her frivolity were to be improved away, it would take with it a great deal of her charm, if not of her beauty ; while underneath all her light-hearted caprice and infectious gaiety, the strongest, stormiest passions would peep out sometimes for a moment and give strange warnings of the tyranny she might exercise over a nature that had not strength and suppleness enough to control hers. Yet for all this, he loved her more than before, while he dreaded the empire she would make a hard struggle to get over him. All the passion of his nature he was holding in leash, feeling that he scarcely yet knew its force, that it was gathering strength with every moment of restraint. Would he be this woman's ruler and husband, or would he marry her only to be her slave?

He tried to shake off these morbid thoughts, and to reassure himself by looking steadfastly on the beautiful little face that in a few days was to be his own : but he found no comfort there. Capacity for emotion, for passion, he read clearly enough, but of thought or higher feeling no trace. He grew hot, began to be haunted by Rahas's horrible words : "The women of the East have no souls," until in a passion of indignation with himself and almost with her he woke her up by a hastily snatched kiss, which, tired as she was, she received with her usual demonstrative responsiveness : and then she insisted on entertaining him with Indian love-songs in a native *patois*, taught her by Sundran, which she crooned in a low, unequal, but rather sweet voice close to his ear for the rest of the way to Miss Glass's house, where he left her scarcely wide awake enough to bid him good night.

This was his last day of suspense, for on the following morning George received a long letter forwarded by Messrs. Smith and Angelo, and dated simply from "Paris," in the thin, pointed feminine handwriting of the last generation. This was the letter :—

" MY DEAR MR. LAURISTON,

" I begin in this way without the formal 'Dear Sir' because, although I do not know you personally, those things which I have heard about you, the simple and manly letter I have received from you, have touched my heart and made me feel as I should feel towards the man who asks to become the husband of my daughter. I am in a strange case, Mr. Lauriston—a passionately loving mother kept apart from her child by a paramount duty. I love Nouna as the plant loves the sun ; ask her to show you my letters, ask her what she remembers of me, and you will find that no woman among your English friends loves her children as I love my child, nor fulfils every wish of her daughter's as I do Nouna's. When you are her husband—for I wish you to become her husband, you are noble-hearted and honourable, and you will take care of her—you will find that her absent mother has a share in all her memories. Her girl's treasures are all presents sent by me, her prayer-book is marked by my hand, the very clothes in which she will be married to you were partly made by me. Don't forget this, don't forget that the innocence and purity you reverence in her are the result of my care. I could not have kept her mind so child-like if she had been always travelling about from country to country as I must do with my husband, who is an invalid. I think she has suffered no harm since she left school. Mrs. Ellis is a good and pious woman who respects me and loves Nouna. As for the Eastern gentleman Rahas, of whom you speak harshly, Nouna and Mrs. Ellis have written to me very openly about him, and I have also received a very respectful explanatory letter from the gentleman himself, and I have come to the conclusion that your dislike to him is probably the result of misunderstanding. I hope and believe this. I am writing fully to you because I wish you to understand and respect the motives of my conduct, that you may look upon me as a mother to you as well as to Nouna, who will pray for the one as for the other, and who hopes at some not far distant time to see you both together. I yearn for that time to come ; I am lonely without my child—without my children. I entreat you to look upon Mr. Angelo as my representative in all things ; what he wishes I wish, what he sanctions I sanction. I beg that you will leave all matters connected with your marriage in his hands ; I have also

written to this effect to Nouna. Whatever he tells you to do, do, in the fullest assurance that it is what I wish. He is an old and trusted friend. It is the manner in which he has written of you that makes me write to you like this. He knows that the dearest wish of my heart for many years has been to marry my daughter to an honourable gentleman of good family and position, able to introduce her into the very best society, as I should have done myself if it had not been for the unfortunate delicacy of my husband the Count. May God bless you both is the earnest desire and prayer of

“Your loving mother (*per avance*),

“LAKSHMI DI VALDESTILLAS.”

“P.S.—I particularly wish that my daughter may be presented at Court as early as possible next season. I regret very much that it is too late for the last drawing-room this year. I will try to be in London for the occasion, but my movements are altogether dependent on the Count's state of health.”

George Lauriston put this letter down, after reading it through to the end, in a state of paralysing bewilderment. “Position!” “Very best society!” “Presented at Court!” What on earth had he said in his letter to her to cause her to make such a ghastly mistake? For some moments he was too much absorbed by his dismay to notice that an enclosure from Mr. Angelo lay in the envelope that had contained Madame di Valdestillas' letter. This was the note:—

“GEORGE LAURISTON, ESQ.,

“DEAR SIR,

“We shall be glad if you can make it convenient to come with Miss Nouna Weston to our office as quickly as possible on receipt of this,

“We are, dear sir, yours faithfully,

“SMITH AND ANGELO.”

An hour and a half later George and Nouna were in a hansom, driving towards the City as fast as a good horse could take them.

CHAPTER XI.

NOUNA was in a state of the highest excitement all the way to the City. She had received a letter from her mother, which she showed to George, after kissing it fervently before she let it go out of her hand. The Countess, after many pious exhortations and affectionate congratulations to her daughter, exhorted her in the most emphatic manner to consult Mr. Angelo in all details connected with her marriage, and yield to him the most explicit obedience, as she would do to herself.

George was struck with this portion of the letter, agreeing so entirely with what the Countess had said to him. The suspicion even flashed across his mind that there might once have been a closer tie between the Countess and Mr. Angelo than that of lawyer and client. When he arrived with his *fiancée* at the solicitors' office the young man was so nervous and excited that Mr. Smith remarked in his genial and jocular manner that he was anticipating the suffering of the ordeal. Nouna, on the other hand, to whom marriage meant the beginning of an era of eternal kisses and shopping, varied by visits to the Zoo, and unknown delights even more intoxicating, beamed with happiness, smiled shyly and coquettishly upon the young clerks in the office, and invaded Mr. Angelo in his sanctum without even knocking at the door. The old gentleman bore this intrusion well, and beckoned Lauriston in with an unusually bland expression.

"I suppose, Mr. Lauriston," he began, after waiting for both his visitors to seat themselves, "that you are anxious for your marriage to take place without delay."

"Yes, yes, he is, we are," answered Nouna for him readily, tapping on the floor with her little feet.

"Certainly," said George, with much more deliberation. "But—" Nouna turned sharply round and looked at him

with aggrieved astonishment. "But there is one passage in the letter from the Countess which you forwarded to me this morning that I should like to point out to you before we go on to other things, as it seems to argue that there has been some misunderstanding on her part which I can't account for."

George got up, and bending down beside Mr. Angelo's writing-table, pointed out the passages in the Countess's letter which referred to "position" and "presentation at Court."

"You see, sir, that Madame di Valdestillas seems to think my pecuniary position is much better than it is, or than it is likely to be," he said. "And yet you know how plainly I have stated it."

"But I don't want to be presented at Court," chimed in Nouna, who had hopped off her chair to read over Mr. Angelo's shoulder the passages referred to, and who was evidently in great anxiety lest the much-coveted prize, a real live husband, should slip through her fingers. "One of my school-fellows had a sister who was presented, and she had her dress torn and caught a cold. I would much rather wear my nice dresses at home, where one can keep warm and not have them spoilt. Tell mamma, Mr. Angelo, please, that I don't want to go to Court."

The lawyer gave a pale but indulgent little smile.

"I think, Mr. Lauriston, that this little matter will prove no serious obstacle. The wife of an officer with a career before him, such as I am sure you have, will certainly be presented in due course; and if when that time comes, this young lady should wish to indulge in any special extravagance for the occasion, I feel sure the Countess would help her daughter to make a becomingly splendid appearance."

George listened in perplexity, while Nouna swept across the room, curtsied low to the iron safe in the corner, and kissed an imaginary royal hand with graceful and fervent loyalty. Then, attracted by the sight of a couple of birds perched on a housetop, she stood on tiptoe to look out of the window, and for a moment left the gentlemen a chance to converse without her assistance.

"You will, I suppose, be married by licence, as that admits of the least delay. By taking out a licence at the Vicar-General's office to-day, you can be married at your own church on Monday."

"Yes, I know that," said George, rather surprised that the lawyer's eagerness to get the matter settled should keep pace with his own. "I was going this morning to a bank in Lombard Street where I keep a particularly modest account, to get the necessary funds."

"Ah, very well. As it is Saturday, you will have to make haste to get there before the banks close. One of my clerks shall go with you, if you don't know your way. And in the meantime I think I had better take this young lady to Doctors' Commons, where she can make the necessary statement to get the licence as well as you could yourself. But, my dear young lady," he continued, turning to Nouna, who had sprung back from the window in great excitement at this suggestion, "you must really control your high spirits a little and carry yourself with more gravity, or you will certainly be refused the licence on the ground that you are too young."

In an instant she had flown to a small square looking-glass that was hanging against the wall in a corner of the room, and had parted the curly bush of soft hair that shaded her forehead, and flattened it down into prim unbecoming bands that made her look a couple of years older.

"That's what we used to do at school, when we wanted to mimic Mrs. Somers," said she grimly.

And she threw open the door to intimate that she was ready to start.

As the old lawyer slowly rose and prepared for the excursion, he said to George, as he shook his head with would-be pleasantry :

"He need be twice a man, Mr. Lauriston, who weds a child."

The warning was not needed ; George had already begun to be of that opinion.

When he returned from the bank, George found that Nouna and the lawyer had come back, and before he could ask any questions about their expedition, Mr. Smith was begging the young people to come to luncheon with him, and they were hurried off from the office so quickly that George had scarcely time to notice a sudden and most unusual gravity in Nouna, who did not recover her usual high spirits until she found herself among the garish glories of the Holborn Restaurant.

When they had finished luncheon, and Mr. Smith, with

many congratulations and pretty speeches, had left them, to seek the domestic delights of his semi-detached villa at Anerley, George remembered that he had forgotten to ask Mr. Angelo for the licence. Nouna answered with a sudden womanly gravity which made him laugh—

"Mr. Angelo has it. And he is going to give notice at the church and everything, so that we shall have nothing to do but to walk in and get married. I've chosen a church Miss Glass told me of, at Kensington."

George was half amused, half offended, by the scrupulous officiousness with which the old lawyer carried out his instructions of "seeing to everything," but he thought no more seriously about the matter.

The next day he spent with a very vague consciousness of what went on around him. For he was bound, by a long-standing invitation, to pass this particular Sunday on the river with Massey, Dicky Wood, and a fast Guardsman, one Captain Pascoe, who was a far too intimate friend of the gentle Dicky's. They would not let him off, as he had wished, because he was by far the best oarsman among them, and the only one who could be depended upon to resist the temptations of champagne-cup sufficiently to keep up the credit of the crew when the sun had been beating mercilessly down upon river and field for half a dozen hours.

It was a beastly day altogether, as they one and all described it afterwards. To begin with, when they arrived by train at Maidenhead, from which place it had been determined to row up to Pangbourne or Streatley and back, they found that the boat, which was the joint property of Massey and Wood, had been left at Kingston some days before by the former, whom the rest fell upon and slanged for his dear little irresponsible ways. Then there was a general wrangle as to what they should do, some being for going down to Kingston, some for hiring a boat, and George being lustily and heartily for going back to town. However, the matter was settled for all of them by the discovery that there was no train to anywhere for two hours, so they got a bad old boat which was the only one at liberty, and started in the worst of humours all round. The numerous defects of the craft supplied them with a subject for invective for the first couple of miles, during which George and Dicky Wood pulled, Captain Pascoe steered, and Massey baled out

the water which they had had the pleasure of discovering at the bottom of the boat. Long before they reached Marlow George had had enough of their society, and proposed to tow them up in order that he might be able to indulge his dreams of coming happiness undisturbed.

Captain Pascoe was a fair-haired, pallid man of thirty-five, always well-dressed, almost always good-humoured, popular with women of every rank and of every class, and liked by all men but a few who loathed him as they would a noxious reptile. He was a man of the world in the sense of taking the lowest possible view of it, and was familiar with every phase of fast life; he had any amount of easy philosophy and indubitable pluck, but was selfish, *blasé*, and corrupt, pointed out as the hero of half a dozen intrigues with women whose position was loftier than their virtue, and of whose favours, it was said, he did not scruple to boast, and at present the slave of one of the most notorious women in London.

George Lauriston hated him, and would have excused himself from this excursion if he had known that Captain Pascoe was to be of the party. On this, the eve of his marriage, when to him the word woman signified all things pure, all things holy, every glance cast by this *roué* at the fair girls in the boats that went by, every slow, soft word with which he passed an opinion on their looks, seemed to George like a sting in a sensitive place. So he lighted his pipe and toiled along bravely in the sun on the towing-path, watching the green trees as they seemed to quiver in the hot air, the velvet bees and the slender dragon-flies that flew across his path, the dry cracking earth at his feet, seeing nothing all the time but a small, ever-changing face, hearing in the hum of the bees only a young girl's voice. When they came to Temple Lock, and he got back into the boat with the rest, their talk jarred on him more than ever; they were discussing the attraction of a certain Chloris White, a great star of the *demi-monde*, to whom Captain Pascoe had introduced the two lads the evening before.

Massey was, of course, raving about the exquisite taste of her dress, the charming *chic* of her manners, the sheen of her golden hair, the languid glances of her eyes, and a great deal more of the same sort, giving off as usual in effusive praises the admiration which, if it had been more contained, might have proved dangerous. But Dicky Wood said so

little and blushed so much, that George, who knew that he was rich, had heard sensational stories about this woman's bloodsucking propensities, and knew that she had helped Pascoe himself to gobble up his patrimony, had a burst of rage against the latter for introducing the lads to her. He remained silently and stolidly smoking therefore, while the others talked. Massey, however, insisted on dragging him into the conversation.

"Here, I say, Lauriston, haven't you got anything to say on the subject? Haven't you seen Chloris White?" he said, with a gentle kick at his companion from where he lay stretched at full length in the bows.

"Not that I know of," answered George indifferently.

"Lauriston always looks the other way when he sees one of those ladies coming," said Captain Pascoe in his soft voice.

"No, I don't," said George rather aggressively. "Why should I?"

"Well, I'm sure I don't know why you should," said the other, in the lazy but effective manner habitual to him, as if he really wished they wouldn't give him the trouble of talking, but if they insisted on bringing it upon themselves, why there it was, you know. "Only I'd heard you liked something of a milder flavour."

"You were quite mistaken then," said George, quietly but with sledge-hammer sincerity, "I admire them and approve of them just as the Dutch do of storks. They are a charming feature of the landscape—what would the park be to look at without them and their turn-outs?—and they live upon the noxious slimy creatures that would otherwise become a pest to decent people."

And he puffed away again at his pipe.

The two younger men laughed awkwardly, rather ashamed of their late extravagance of adulation, and afraid of Lauriston's contempt. But Captain Pascoe, who felt venomously angry, said it was very smart, if it hadn't been said before, as he rather fancied. And from that moment the want of harmony between the elements of the party became more and more apparent until it is a question whether all did not feel when they got back to town that it was worth while to have gone through the day together for the sake of the relief and delight of parting.

George hurried to the street where Nouna was staying,

only for the rapture of gazing upon the dead eyes of the windows behind which she was sleeping. He walked up and down on the opposite side of the way for hours, in that irrational ecstasy of anticipation trembling on the borders of fulfilment which the devotees of long engagements—whatever their compensating advantages of better knowledge and calmer reason may be—never know. It was to be a perfect life, this new life of his and hers, humanised, not vulgarised, by comparative poverty, with no trials less ennobling than the struggles of his just ambition, and his endeavours to bring his young wife's extravagant views into conformity with the smallness of their fortune. At that moment the prospect seemed almost too radiant, and George at last went reluctantly away with a superstitious fear that something must happen on the morrow to dash down the fabric of so much supernatural happiness.

However, when, on the following morning, after a sleepless night of feverish imaginings, George fell at last into a doze, and waking sprang out of bed in crazy terror lest he should have overslept himself, everything went as smoothly as possible. He was in plenty of time to go to the apartments he had taken, to see that all was ready for his bride's reception, then to be at the church at eight o'clock, as they had arranged; even as he drove up to the door he saw another hansom approaching with Nouna and Mr. Angelo, who was to give the bride away; and, lastly, he had not forgotten the ring. He waited at the door for them, and helped Nouna to descend with a tremor in his limbs and a tumultuous upheaval of all the forces of his nature as she laid her small hand lightly on his arm and sprang to the ground with indecorous haste, and a face beaming with happy, light-hearted excitement.

She was most oddly dressed in white mull muslin draperies that appeared to be kept together only by a broad sash of soft white silk that was swathed several times round her body, and the wide ends of which hung on the left side nearly to her feet. Long white silk gloves covered her arms and met the hanging draperies, while her head was crowned, not covered, by a white silk fez. Her dark skin glowed with an unusual and beautiful tinge of pink, her black eyes danced with excitement, and between her vividly crimson lips two straight rows of strong ivory teeth gleamed as she laughed. A handsome, graceful, untamed creature,

with all the instincts and scarcely more than the capacity for thought of a healthy young animal, skipping into a Christian church to bind herself with lifelong vows in exactly the same spirit with which she had entered the draper's shop the week before to enjoy the delicious excitement of buying a new bonnet.

A baker's boy, who happened to be passing, put down his basket to watch her in open-mouthed admiration and astonishment. George himself, intoxicated as he was by his passion, felt a sudden misgiving, not as to the wisdom, but as to the generosity, of entering with this eager child into a compact, the nature and terms of which, it now occurred to him for the first time, she did not in the least understand. Instead of sobering her by its solemn significance, marriage seemed to be turning her head, and to have by anticipation dispersed even those pretty little moods of dignity and of languid silence with which she had formerly varied the monotony of her childish gaiety. Her very greeting was sufficiently suggestive of her views of the impending ceremony.

"You see I'm all in white," she began as she sprang down upon the pavement. "I thought you would like me to be dressed in white, so I made this dress myself last night, and sat up so late making the cap—for I made it all myself, fancy that!—that I overslept myself this morning and was nearly late. What would you have done if I hadn't come at all?"

"I should have come and fetched you," said George, as he shook hands with Mr. Angelo, and then drew the little bride's hand through his arm to lead her into the church.

"Isn't this a queer wedding?" she chattered on as they went through the great outer door which the pew-opener had just thrown open, and by which she now stood curtsying. "I've been thinking how hard it seems that I should be married without any cake or any bridesmaids, and mamma not here, nor anybody I know. But I'm not going to cry, no, I'm not going to cry." As they got inside the church she looked up from George's arm to his face and saw that his eyes were moist. "Why, it's you who are crying, and you are trembling too! What's the matter?" she whispered anxiously.

"Nothing, my darling," he whispered back, as he pressed

her hand against his side, "I was only thinking how good I must be to you, to make up for your having neither mother, nor cake, nor bridesmaids."

They were walking up the middle aisle by this time and, perhaps for a moment a little awed by Lauriston's solemn manner, or by the cold hollow bareness of the large, almost empty church, Nouna made no further remark until they reached the altar-rails, when she took an exhaustive look round, and observed that there was "a very funny window." The pew-opener, who had followed them up the aisle as quickly as decency permitted, now suggested to the bridegroom that he and the lady should seat themselves in one of the front pews until the vicar, who had not yet arrived, should be ready. But the bride dismissed her with dignity, saying, "No, we will wait, so tell him to make haste"; and George, who felt that Nouna would look upon any inclination to take advantage of the suggestion as a desire to retract, stood up manfully with his back to the few spectators who at this early hour had trickled in to see the wedding, and began in the midst of his nervous excitement to be tormented by a fear of being late for parade. Mr. Angelo, who had, according to his own and the Countess's express wish, arranged all the details of the marriage, now appeared from the vestry with the clergyman, who looked blue about the chin and rather cross, as if he had come out in a hurry, without having had time to shave or breakfast.

Just as George turned at the sound of their footsteps, he caught sight of a figure among the scanty congregation which made him start forward, forgetful of everything else. A low but indignant "St, st, what is the matter with you, sir?" from the clergyman, who glared at him in a manner which seemed to say that if they couldn't keep their minds on what they were about he wouldn't marry them at all, recalled him to himself, and the service began.

To do them justice, they gave him no further trouble. Nouna had studied her part in the service, had not only taken off her left glove without being told, but had tucked up the draperies that formed her sleeve, and left her arm bare to the shoulder as if ready to be vaccinated. She tripped off her part of the service glibly, in a clear, bright voice, without waiting for the clergyman, and then looked up at George with a tiny movement of the head that was almost a nod, as much as to say: "You see I'm determined

to do you credit." The only thing that puzzled her was the difficulty of knowing when to kneel down and when to stand up; in this, and in this alone, she was obliged to accept the clergyman's guidance, and for this she kept her eyes fixed carefully upon him all the time.

Lauriston's nervousness, increased by the sight of the figure he felt sure he recognised as that of Rahas, was so great that he became the victim of what he believed to be a most strange delusion of the ear. It seemed to him that every word of the prayers of the service was repeated, as the clergyman uttered it, in a soft, distinct tone, away in the body of the church behind them. As soon as the service was over, the bridegroom turned round with machine-like rapidity, and was just in time to see the figure he had noticed go down the further end of the south aisle and out at the door. Although the man wore a European overcoat and carried in his hand an English hat, George felt more than ever convinced that it was Rahas. He was accompanied by a woman, of whose appearance Lauriston could only note two details: she wore dark clothing and was small of stature. It was not Mrs. Ellis, certainly. Sundran? He thought not. While the young man stood, as if transfixed, staring after these two disappearing figures with straining eyes, unmindful of the touch of his newly-made wife on his arm, Mr. Angelo's precise tones, close at his ear, roused him from his stupefaction.

"Come, Mr. Lauriston," he said in a low but rather peremptory tone, "we have to go into the vestry."

The old lawyer's face was, as usual, impassive; but it occurred to Lauriston, a man rendered by his profession observant of details, that the steadiness with which Mr. Angelo ignored his persistent stare at the side-door argued that he was himself aware of the objects of interest there. He said nothing, however, but followed the clergyman into the vestry, and signed his name in the register.

"Come, now it's your turn, little one," he said tenderly to Nouna, who had slipped from his arm and was standing very quietly beside Mr. Angelo.

She glanced up at the old lawyer, who gave her his arm with great ceremony, led her to the desk, and turned immediately to the bridegroom.

"You saw, or thought you saw some one you knew among the congregation, I fancy," said he in his quiet dry manner.

Lauriston looked up quickly from the page over which he was bending.

"Yes, I certainly did think so, in fact I am almost sure of it," he said, turning to notice the old man's expression.

"I imagined that to be the case from your expression as we left the altar," said the lawyer, keeping Lauriston's eyes fixed by the steady gaze of his own. "Who do you think it was?"

"I feel sure it was Rahas," said George in a low voice, still watching the face of the lawyer, who now took Nouna's place to sign the register as a witness to the marriage. "Did you see him too?"

The old gentleman did not answer at once; he was bending low over the open page before him to finish his signature with a careful flourish. When he had done this, he placed the blotting-paper over it, put his arm through that of the bridegroom, and moved away with him.

"My eyes are not as good as yours, Mr. Lauriston," he said; "I should not know my own son at that distance."

"There was a lady—a woman with him," said George.

"A woman whom you know?" asked the lawyer, whose interest in the matter, however, seemed to have diminished.

"I think not."

"Then there is nothing extraordinary in the circumstance."

"What does the man want at my wedding?"

"All friends of the parties find weddings interesting. Perhaps you misjudge this Eastern gentleman. He has called at my office to give me a letter for the Countess, and he expressed the most kindly sentiments towards you. See, Mrs. Lauriston seems impatient."

The two gentlemen were conversing in a low voice just within the vestry door. Nouna had slipped past them into the body of the church, and stood in an unusually quiet and pensive mood gazing at the altar where she had lately knelt. George shook himself free from a crowd of bewildering questions that were forcing themselves into his mind, and called to her.

"Nouna, come and sign the register."

"I've done it," "She has done so," answered she and the lawyer together.

"I didn't see you."

"I did it while you were talking," said she, quickly.

"Yes, yes, it's all right; the lady signed her name," broke in the vicar, who thought he was never going to get rid of them.

So George, hurried away by wife, lawyer, and vicar, did not see Nouna's first and last signature of her maiden name.

CHAPTER XII.

THE minutes that had been wasted in waiting for the vicar before the wedding, and in conversing with Mr. Angelo after it, had placed George Lauriston in a singular position : there was not time enough left to drive with his bride to the apartments he had taken for her in a street near Wilton Place, and then to return to the barracks and put on his uniform before parade. He must either risk being late for his duty for the first time, or miss the pleasure of himself introducing his young wife to her new home. His mind was made up before he reached the church-door. He had a superstition, the more influential that he felt his own weakness where his wife was concerned, against beginning his married life by a breach of discipline.

Bending down over his little bride, who was leaving the church much more sedately than she had entered it, as if the solemnity of the married state had already begun to work its sobering influence upon her, he said, very low and very tenderly : "Nouna, my darling, what would you say if I asked you to go to our new home by yourself and wait for me there? If I told you I could not go there now straight with you without neglecting my duty?"

"Say!" said the small bride, lifting up a dismayed face suddenly, and speaking in a tremulous voice above the pitch usually considered decorous in a church. "Why, I should say, never mind your duty, but come with me."

George would not accept such a portent as this, natural as the little heart-cry undoubtedly was.

"Oh no, darling, you wouldn't say that," he urged, in a hurried whisper. "You wouldn't like them to say I was a less good soldier because I was married."

"I shouldn't care what they said, as long as I had you

with me," persisted Nouna piteously, clinging to his arm, while two tears came to her eyes and allowed themselves to be blinked down her cheeks.

George hesitated. The intoxication was mounting rapidly from heart to head as he looked at her, felt the magnetic pressure of the small fingers. Mr. Angelo, seeing the difficulty, came up with his usual deliberate step and detached the clinging bride with the unemotional dexterity of a machine.

"The Countess would be much annoyed if she thought you would impede your husband in the execution of his duty, Nouna," said he as drily as ever. "I will take you home, and Mr. Lauriston, I am sure, will need no urging to join you as speedily as possible."

George was astonished at the effect this mention of her mother had upon the wilful girl, and he inwardly noted the fact for future use. The hansom in which they had come were waiting outside; he helped her tenderly into one of them and consigned her to the care of the old lawyer, assuring her that he would be with her again as soon as ever he could. Then getting into the second cab, he drove as fast as he could to Victoria.

Luck was against him, however. It was this day of all days that Colonel Florencecourt chose for putting an end to the estrangement which his own acts had brought about between himself and his favourite officer. No sooner was parade over than the Colonel, who had already spoken to him more amiably than usual, and told him with ominous friendliness that he had something to say to him, came up, thrust his arm through that of the young man, and reminded him that they were both engaged to lunch with the Millards in Grosvenor Square. George was thunderstruck. He had of course forgotten all about the appointment in the absorbing pursuit of matrimony, and his jaw fell perceptibly at this reminder.

"Eh?" said the Colonel. "Still a little sore at Miss Ella's treatment? But supposing her 'No' should be no more irrevocable than a lady's 'No' to a good-looking and dashing young fellow usually is? Look here, Lauriston, I have reason to think the Millards have an invitation in hand for you down to their place in Norfolk, and probably Ella had a hand in that, as the clever young lady has in most of the family affairs."

"But indeed, Colonel, I have had leave enough for this year, and couldn't expect any more. And besides, I really haven't the least wish in the world to go out of town at present."

The Colonel looked at him, as he thought, suspiciously.

"As to the leave, I would guarantee you should get that," he said with a degree more of his usual asperity. "You know my own place is close by the Millards'; I am going there myself for the shooting, and I have a very particular wish to see more of you this autumn than I have had time to do lately. Don't disappoint me in this, Lauriston; there are not many men whose society I think worth half-a-dozen words of request."

His tone, if not absolutely affectionate, was kindly enough as he said these last words to make George sorry to disappoint him, sorrier still to think what the elder man's vexation and even grief would be when he should learn how far counter to his odd prejudice against brunettes the younger officer had run in his choice of a bride.

"I gave up all hope of marrying your niece Ella, Colonel, on the evening when she refused me," said he, feeling guilty and uncomfortable. "I should never think of asking her again, and I should feel so uncomfortable in her presence"—this he said most fervently, for nothing could be truer—"that I had given up all thought even of going there this morning, and have made another appointment, which I am bound to keep."

"You are bound to keep the one first made," said the Colonel shortly, "as I know by a note I got from my sister-in-law that she expects you. Change your dress as quickly as you can; she wants us to be there early."

He turned away abruptly, and George went to his rooms without further protest, but in a white heat of rage at his own idiocy in not remembering this wretched appointment. All he could do was to ask the Colonel to stay for a moment at a telegraph-office on their way to Grosvenor Square, and to send off a message to his poor little bride, telling her not to be lonely, that he should be detained a little while, but that he would be back as early as possible. Then the delicious thrill of possession that the writing of the address to "Mrs. Lauriston" gave him, was so enthralling that he lingered a few moments, pencil in hand, before rejoining his imperious senior officer waiting outside. Indeed neither man found great pleasure, on this occasion, in the other's

society. George guessed that the Colonel had resigned himself to the thought of his marrying the dark-complexioned Ella, only to avoid the worse evil of some dangerous entanglement, to which the young man's recent conduct ominously pointed. Both were glad when Grosvenor Square was reached, and a rather intermittent conversation upon indifferent subjects broke up.

The Millards all reproached George with having neglected them lately, and Sir Henry at once broached the subject of an invitation to Norfolk, the suggestion of which had pleased him greatly.

"You must come," he said hastily, when the young man pleaded something about "working hard this autumn"; "we won't take any excuse. The Colonel says he can get you leave, and if, as you say, you're going to take to writing, why everybody knows you can get better inspiration in the fresh air of the country than you can among the chimney-pots. And you will enjoy yourself, George, I know you will. It isn't the orthodox big country-house, you know, where you can fancy yourself in London except that it's duller; we all rough it down there, in a cottage of my own that we've enlarged as we wanted. My wife and I play Mr. and Mrs. Boffin, you know. She has fashion and a carpet up here, while I have comfort and a sanded floor in Norfolk. Isn't it so, Cicely?" he added to his eldest daughter, who had come to lean over her father's shoulder, and to smile acquiescence in all he said in the prettiest possible manner. "I shall set you girls to persuade him."

Cicely was the one who never had anything to say, and whose dove-like eyes and gentle, quiet manners roused in you a strong anxiety to know what she thought and felt, which nobody had as yet succeeded in discovering.

"Set Ella, papa," said Cicely, beaming as sweetly as ever. "Charlotte and I have no influence; it's always Ella."

"Ella, come here, you're wanted," said her father. And when his youngest daughter had crossed the room obediently, he put his hand on Lauriston's shoulder, and spoke in a playfully magisterial tone. "This person is accused of wilful disobedience both to his Colonel and to an old friend, who both desire and command his attendance at Maple Lodge, in the county of Norfolk, on or about the First of September next. See what you can do to bring him to reason."

"Perhaps it will be I who will bring you all to reason

when you hear the powerful arguments I have to urge on my side. Ella shall judge," said George.

And he laughingly led Ella, who was as prim and solemn as ever, to a sofa, where he sat down beside her, and instantly resumed his gravity.

"Of course you don't want to come," said Ella with disagreeable dryness, crossing her knees and clasping her hands round the uppermost in a masculine manner which constantly shocked her sisters' sense of propriety, and recalled to Lady Millard's mind her own ways in the old time before she crossed the Atlantic and became the dignified wife of an English baronet.

"It isn't that at all," said George gravely ; "I was married this morning."

The girl was startled. She looked full in his face as if trying to read in his eyes all the circumstances of that hasty step, even while she silenced the cry of her own heart. She had been honest with him and with herself ; she had never allowed herself, except in a rare idle day-dream, to think that the strong secret inclination towards him of her suppressed and somewhat neglected affections, would ever blossom into happy love ; but now that even a day-dream was no longer possible, she felt suddenly that she had lost something precious out of that storehouse of heart and imagination which holds a woman's fairest joys. In the yearning, searching, half-bewildered look she gave him George, if he did not read quite all that was in her heart, learnt enough to fill him with self-reproach and yet with a strong sense of human sympathy.

"It was a rash thing to do, I know," he said, relieved by feeling that here at least was a being to whom he could pour out all his heart on the subject ; "but she was in the most dangerous circumstances, scarcely more than a child, and surrounded by careless and undesirable companions. The only way to guard her was to marry her, and besides—"

"You love her," said Ella gently.

"Yes."

Both were silent for a moment. Then she said, all her ordinary abruptness of manner melted by kindly feeling :

"I suppose, George, from what you have told me and what you have not told me, that she was not, well—not in the same rank of life as you are ?"

"No, at least—certainly not in the same circumstances. She is the daughter of a Spanish Countess, who does not live in England, and you know we English have a sort of idea that only some half-dozen foreign titles are well-authenticated, so that a descent from Russian princes, for instance, is accounted rather less desirable than a descent from English buttermen."

"That will hurt you socially then, George, because people will not be so ready to take her up."

George shrugged his shoulders. "I don't care much for society myself, but it may be hard on the poor child."

Ella rose, as if moved by a sudden impulse, and saying she must remind her mother of an appointment, she left George and crossed to her parents, to each of whom she said a few words in a low voice as luncheon was announced. They had scarcely all taken their seats in the dining-room, when Lady Millard, upon a glance from her youngest daughter, said :

"I don't think you have treated us quite fairly in keeping us all in the dark except Ella, George. However, there is nothing left for us now but to congratulate you, and to insist upon your coming to us at Maple Lodge in September, and bringing your wife with you."

"You might have knocked me down with a feather, as the housemaids say, when Ella told me about it just now, and said I was to hold my tongue about it till it was announced," said Sir Henry, while the other two girls lifted up their gentle voices and clamoured questions about the bride.

George glanced gratefully at Ella while he answered as much as he could, thanked Lady Millard for her invitation, was overruled when he pleaded that his wife was too young and too much of a hoyden to pay visits until she had sobered down a little, and looked anxiously at the Colonel, who had received the announcement in dead silence, and refused to offer the smallest comment. Nobody but himself and Ella knew how very recent his wedding had been, so George found it impossible to break away from them until four o'clock, when, much to his vexation, the Colonel left too. The elder man read the expression on the face of the younger, and he said, in a cold voice, as he kept pace with him on the broad pavement of the square :

"I am not going to trouble you either with reproaches or

warnings : it is too late. But I am going to give you two words of advice. You are young, ardent, generous-blooded ; you are in dangers that I can understand. It is plain that you have married for love, and love only, in the hottest and most reckless way, some little jade whose face has bewitched you. Well, listen. Don't begin by worshipping her as a goddess, or you will end by having to propitiate her as a devil. Live two lives ; one with her, all sweetness and softness and silliness, using up all the superfluous sentiment and folly we are all burdened with, in kisses and sighs at her footstool : but once shut yourself into your study, or shut her up in her drawing-room with her pug-dog and her needles and snips of canvas and wool, forget her, brace yourself up to what you have always looked upon as the serious interests of your life, lock her pretty face and her pretty prattle right up in your heart, and keep your mind and your soul free from the sickly contamination. When you are with her, think of nothing but her ; when you are away from her, think of anything else. Never mind what she does while you're away. If there's any harm in her, it would come out if you kept her under glass, while she's a thousand times less likely to get into mischief if she respects you as her master and superior, instead of despising you as her slave. Remember a man can never be the *equal* of a woman. If you only admit the possibility, it is war between you until the one or the other has come off conqueror."

He ceased speaking abruptly, and they walked on a few moments in silence.

At last Lauriston said : "That system might do for a philosopher, Colonel, but it will not suit the every-day Englishman."

"I should not recommend it to the every-day Englishman. I recommend it to you because I wish to save Her Majesty a good officer with a heart and a brain, both of which, for any purpose outside the mere physical functions of existence, are imperilled by your marriage. How do you suppose that I, without some such rule of conduct, should have got even where I am, weighted with Lady Florencecourt?"

"Ah, Lady Florencecourt !" exclaimed George hastily and deprecatingly, forgetting ordinary civility in horror at this comparison between Nouna and a lady who was, with-

out perhaps any clearly specified reason, the bogey of all her acquaintance.

The Colonel was not at all annoyed ; he gave a little quick shake of the head, and burst out with abrupt vehemence—

“ By Jove, Lady Florencecourt’s an angel of light compared to—— ” Suddenly, without any warning, he pulled himself up short, and added after a second’s pause, in a milder and more reserved tone—“ compared to some of the specimens I have known.”

Lauriston glanced at him in surprise. He would have rather liked to know something about the “specimen” or “specimens” who had made the fiery little Colonel a woman-hater, and caused that obnoxious woman, Lady Florencecourt, to appear an ideal wife in his eyes. But the elder man’s burst of confidence was over. He proceeded to ask in a dry tone—“ You have quite made up your mind to treat my advice as advice is usually treated, I suppose ? ”

“ You are rather hard upon me, Colonel. You do me the honour to say I have brains, but you take it for granted that I haven’t used them. I’ve been on the rack between my thoughts and my feelings ever since I found out I loved this girl, and I’ve puzzled out for myself some sort of plan to live upon.”

“ And what’s that ? To ‘ give her the key of your heart,’ I suppose, and make her ‘ the sharer of your thoughts and feelings.’ ”

“ I should be sorry to have a wife that wasn’t ! ”

The Colonel stopped with a short laugh, and looked at him with half-closed eyes and hard-set mouth.

“ Well, try it ! ” said he raspingly ; and with a half-mocking salute he turned round and went rapidly off by the way they had come.

George looked after him regretfully ; he was inclined, after all, to put on Lady Florencecourt the whole blame of the souring process which the Colonel’s really warm and kindly nature had obviously undergone. He was grateful to the elder officer for a steady liking for and interest in himself. In the uprooting and tempestuous state of mind into which the red-hot romance of his marriage had plunged him, it was with a pang of yearning towards the sincere and steadfast old friend that he saw him depart disappointed, if not angry. But no man of three-and-twenty can trouble

himself deeply about one of his own sex when he is on his way to a passionately adored bride ; and a minute later George was in a hansom on his way to ——— Street, in an ecstasy of anticipation that left no room for a doubt or a fear. Every step was bringing him nearer to her, making his heart beat faster ; the hansom was turning into Wilton Place, and George, in his fiery impatience, had flung open the doors and taken a half-sovereign from his pocket for his shilling fare in the reckless spirit that makes us anxious to communicate to the meanest mortals (with no disrespect to the cabbies) the joy that seems too great for one body and soul to contain, when suddenly his eyes, straining to catch the earliest possible glimpse of the house that contained his treasure, fell, for the second time that day, upon the man who of all others seemed to the young bridegroom the harbinger of ill-luck and disaster. The Eastern merchant Rahas, not in the costume he had worn that morning, but in scarlet fez and a long, dark-blue garment, which was a cross between a frock-coat and a dressing-gown, was crossing the street hastily exactly in front of Nouna's new home, as if he had just visited it.

"Stop !" shouted George to the driver, and before the man could obey he had sprung out, tossed him the half-sovereign, which the recipient caught with a dexterity he would not have shown for a shilling, and started in pursuit.

The Oriental had given one look round, and disappeared with the agile rapidity of a cat up a narrow street a little further on. George followed, dashed round the corner, and found himself in a stone-paved alley with stables on each side. There was no human being to be seen ; but a barking dog at the other end seemed to have been lately disturbed. George traversed the little court at a sharp run, found an opening, and went through into a street beyond, where a few people were passing to and fro with no appearance of excitement, and carriages and cabs were going both ways. He saw that the ingenious Eastern gentleman had given him the slip, and he returned towards his new home with his spirits dashed, and his heart full of misgiving.

If Rahas had just visited Nouna, as George suspected, he must have followed her from the church to her new home, as George had told no one the address till after his

wedding. Then how had he timed his departure so as just to escape meeting her husband? And then again came the question which had puzzled him at the church: How did Rahas know at what time and at what church Nouna would be married?

He took out the latch-key for which, with an old bachelor instinct, he had at once asked the landlady on taking the rooms, fitted it with an unsteady hand into the door, and let himself in. Just inside he caught sight of his face in the narrow strip of glass that filled the middle beam of the hat-stand, and was struck by his own pallor, and by the stern expression of his features.

"By Jove!" he said to himself, trying to laugh, and finding with surprise that he was quite cold, and that his teeth were chattering, "here's a pretty face for a bridegroom. If I were to give Nouna, my poor little Nouna, my first kiss with lips as blue as that," and he peered at himself mockingly close to the glass, "she'd think she'd married a corpse."

And he pulled himself together, drew down the ends of his moustache, and rearranged his light satin tie, telling himself that he had been a fool to chase the fellow at all instead of going straight to Nouna to learn whether the wretch had really called and attempted to annoy her. But a blight had fallen upon his ecstatic happiness, and he broke off in an attempt to sing as he ran up stairs to the first floor.

As he went he heard voices, which ceased suddenly when his footsteps sounded on the landing; then there was a slight rustling, and a noise as of something thrown over in a hurry. He considered a moment, and then, the key of the bedroom door being on the outside, he quietly turned it in the lock before entering the sitting-room.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE apartments George Lauriston had taken for his wife were two bright and pleasantly furnished rooms, not large, but sufficiently lofty, with no aggressive blue glass or china ornaments, crochet antimacassars, or other cherished relics of the professional landlady. There was a piano, not likely to be much of a resource, perhaps, to the player with "an ear"; there was a handsome carved oak book-case, carefully locked, which contained, sandwiched in with old-fashioned trashy gift-books and much futile evangelical literature, some tempting back volumes of the *Cornhill* and *Blackwood*, and a beautifully preserved set of Scott's novels. The mantelpiece was draped with an inexpensive but harmonious imitation of tapestry, the worn places on the carpet were covered with unlined goat-skins, there was the inevitable sideboard with doors that *would* not keep closed without a neat little wedge of newspaper, there were modern spindle-legged, handsomely covered chairs, and a plush-hung table, and there was a big, broad, luxurious Chesterfield settee, which had evidently been bought a bargain because it was inconveniently large, and on which Lauriston had again and again, during the last few days, pictured the ease-loving Nouna reclining. To add to the attractions of her new home for his bride, George had taken care to fill every available corner with flowers—mignonette and geraniums in pots on the sill of the two windows, cut roses and carnations, sweetpeas and purple and golden heartsease—crammed into every vase and glass the landlady could spare.

On the table he had caused to be spread a wedding-breakfast such as Oberon might have served to Titania. For this great human goose would have shrunk from the

suggestion that a healthy girl of sixteen can generally eat anything, and lots of it ; and that rounds of bread and butter cut pretty thick, a plentiful helping of dried haddock, or a couple of eggs and a rasher of bacon, all washed down with immoderate draughts of weak tea, will form an acceptable meal at nine in the morning to our fairest maids, and that your delicate appetite—alas, that it should be so!—is generally the result of sickly health. Piled high in the centre was a pyramid of giant strawberries, and round about were plates with French pastry, bonbons, game sandwiches thin as wafers, bananas, limes and a pineapple ; the whole guarded by a white porcelain elephant, out of whose houdah small ferns were growing in an unlikely manner. This last introduction was a happy thought of Lauriston's, and was supposed to remind his bride gracefully of the land of her birth.

He had been extravagant certainly ; what churl would not be for his wedding day ? But what happiness those preparations had given him ! How he had frowningly scrutinised the rooms, to be quite sure that no single corner presented a less pleasing appearance than could by any possible ingenuity be given to it ! How, in imagination, he had followed her with his eyes as she tripped through the rooms in her bird-like way, stopping to hover over the flowers, to eat a strawberry, to draw aside the curtains and peep out from her new nest into the street ! How he had stood at the door of the bedchamber as in a sanctuary, with his heart full of a wish, devout as a prayer, that the child-woman who was coming to his arms might know no sorrow from which a strong man's love could save her !

And now by some shadowy calamity that he did not yet understand, it was all changed, the sweet home-coming was spoilt, and he stood before his newly-made wife with no absorbing tenderness in his eyes, but with anxiety, suspicion, and fear struggling under the mask of apparent sternness, which was the outward sign of his efforts at self-control.

Nouna was alone, lying on the couch as he had so often by anticipation pictured her. She was curled up prettily enough, her head back upon the side, which was soft enough to serve for a cushion. The drapery of her arms was drawn carefully down, but the left hand, with its tiny gold ring, was placed proudly *en évidence* against her white sash. She looked flushed, shy, and rather frightened, and gave a little

nervous laugh and a timid smile as he came in, which would have enchanted him but for the unexplained sights and sounds which had preceded his entrance.

"Who was that with you, Nouna?" he asked gently enough, but without coming nearer to her than the door, which he had just shut.

"With me!" she exclaimed, raising her eyebrows very innocently.

"Yes, dear. I heard some one scuffling about in here and talking just as I came in. Now, Nouna, my darling, why don't you tell me?" he asked very softly, coming a step nearer.

But she curled herself up in the corner of the couch, and looked up at him like a marmoset who has broken a Dresden cup—for a marmoset knows Dresden, and prefers it as a plaything to the ordinary breakfast china.

"Don't look like that. You frighten me," she said in a low voice, with an inclination divided between weeping and running away.

George came and knelt by her, but as she shrank back he did not offer to touch her.

"Listen to me, little one. I am not angry, only sorry you will not tell me what I ask. Who was the woman I heard talking to you just now? Was it your mother?"

"Mamma! Oh, no, no, no," said she with a convincing accent of astonishment. "I tell you there wasn't anybody; I was singing to myself," she added with less appearance of sincerity.

George drew back deeply wounded, and looking more stern than he guessed. In the silence between them he heard the rattle of the lock in the next room, and the shaking of the door. He walked up to the folding-doors which led into the bedroom, while Nouna turned her head to watch him anxiously. Crouching down on the other side of the bed, with more of the appearance of an animal than ever now that she was foiled in her attempt to escape, was the Indian servant Sundran.

"Get up," said George shortly. "No one is going to hurt you. What are you doing here?"

"I was doing no harm, sahib. I came to see my pretty missee, Missee Nouna, my own foster-child that I nurse and love. She send for me, sahib, she send for me; she lonely without me. Sahib, let me stay. I will serve you, only for food to keep me alive if you let me stay."

She was passionately in earnest, and without rising from her knees she dragged herself to him and tried to kiss his feet. George evaded the unwelcome embrace. He couldn't bear this woman, and the thought that Nouna could really have missed her unwholesome prattle enough to send for her clandestinely on her wedding day gave him deep pain. He could scarcely help being touched by her animal-like devotion, but to allow her to remain in Nouna's service now that the latter was his wife and was to begin her nobler education under his influence and guidance, was on every account not to be thought of.

"You never thought of staying, Sundran. You were trying to get away without my seeing you, encouraging my wife to deceive me on her very wedding day. How can you expect me to keep near her such a wicked adviser as that?"

"Sahib, I did not know you would be good to me. I thought you would be cruel and hard and fierce, as the English sahibs are sometimes. Oh, I have known them! But you are good, you are noble; you will not separate the sweet young lady who is the light of my eyes from her poor old Sundran."

The poor creature's eyes were indeed full of passionate tears, and George, who was no more proof than the majority of his sex against that form of argument in a woman, said gruffly:

"Nonsense, I tell you it's impossible. But you can go down stairs and get them to give you some tea if you like, and afterwards you shall see your mistress again. But mind, if you ever attempt these underhand tricks again, you shall never set eyes on her as long as you live."

She seemed a little comforted, and murmured broken, humble thanks as she got up and dried her eyes on a corner of the white garment which served her as shawl and head-dress. Then George went through the next room, Nouna still watching him in the same attitude as before, and unlocking the bedroom door, let the woman out. As soon as he had seen her get to the bottom of the stairs he re-locked the bedroom door and put the key in his pocket to prevent her hiding herself there again, and went back to his bride in a very chastened mood. This first experience of matrimony was certainly disillusionising. He must get to the bottom of the whole business at once, that was certain; but how was

he to begin? It was too cruel to have to ply this little creature whom he loved with questions instead of kisses. He sat down by the table, keeping his eyes resolutely fixed upon the china elephant.

"When did you send for Sundran, Nouna?" he asked huskily.

"To-da—ay."

There was a mournful little break of her voice upon the last syllable, which was almost too much for him. He took a strawberry from the dish, which now held only three or four, to keep his hands from twitching, and swallowed it ferociously, as his mouth was dry and parched.

"Who brought her here?"

No answer.

"Well, dear?"

She began to sob. George swallowed more strawberries, stalks and all, but found small relief in them.

"It was Rahas who brought her," said George, trying to be as gentle as possible.

More sobs, so that the unfortunate inquisitor had to get up, walk with a martial tread to the window, and say his next words with his back to her.

"When did he come? What did he come for, Nouna?"

The tears were in George's eyes too by this time.

"Answer me, answer me, child," cried he in a frenzy as she began to moan miserably.

Her quick ears caught the breaking sound in his voice, and suddenly ceasing in her signs of grief she called aloud:

"Come and ask me *here*, and I'll tell you anything!"

He turned round. She was holding out her arms. George gave a great cry.

"Nouna, my wife, my wife!"

The next moment she was crushed up against his breast.

When out of the intoxication of that first embrace George drifted slowly back to a dim consciousness of earthly things, it came upon him with a sudden sobering shock that there was something new and unaccounted for in the appearance of his bride. For on the little slender arm that encircled his neck with the clinging, vibrating pressure of an absorbing passion, shone and glittered close under his eyes a sparkling mass of precious stones. He drew away from her suddenly, and seizing both her arms almost roughly, pushed up the half transparent sleeves and looked from the one to the

other in stupefaction, while Nouna laughed aloud in exuberant, luxurious happiness.

"Where did you get these?" he asked in bewilderment even stronger than his anxiety.

George had but a scant and careless acquaintance with the contents of jewellers' windows, and his circle of diamond-bedecked duchesses was less than limited. But there was a quiet self-sufficiency about the way in which those white transparent stones allowed themselves to be looked upon as unobtrusive modest things, and then, at a turn of Nouna's wrist, flashed dazzling rays into his eyes, which told him that these pretty ornaments were not like the innocent and harmless mock jewels in the silver-gilt bracelets that Nouna had been allowed to deck herself out with in Mary Street, but were that bane of the husband—diamonds. What the value of the jewels she was wearing might be he did not even guess; but he could not doubt that the seven bracelets she had on her arms, and a glittering diamond lizard three inches long, with rubies for eyes, which fastened her sash where that morning there had been only a simple pin, and a necklace of large pearls that encircled her throat, had cost more than four or five years of his pay. He looked at them with a very grave and doubtful face, with as much mistrust and misliking as if they had been poisonous insects.

"Ha, ha!" cried Nouna, raising her arms and turning them about that the jewels might flash and sparkle the more in the rays of the afternoon sun struggling through the blinds. "Where did I get them? You must guess that."

She was for the moment too much absorbed in the delight of watching the changing lights on her trinkets to notice the discontent in his face. Glancing then merrily at him to direct his attention to the play of the sunlight upon the stones, she let her arms fall as she noted his expression.

"Don't you like to see me wear pretty things?" she asked plaintively; then, as he did not at once answer, she turned petulantly away from him, and threw herself face downwards full-length upon the couch. "It is true what Rahas says," she cried passionately, "that an Englishman likes jewels on every woman but his wife, that he would rather she should appear ugly in his own eyes than pretty in anybody else's, that he calls her a goddess to reconcile her to leading the—the—life of a do—og!"

All this she poured out parrot-like amid sobs and floods of tears, while George remained on his knees beside her, and listened as quietly as a statue. Like other open and generous natures with an element of strength in them, he could be as merciful towards the frank confession of weakness as he was hard in the face of deception. He thought Rahas had worked on her by means of her love of finery, and by dark warnings against the husband of whom she had as yet had no experience, and stifling all impulses of rage against the author of the evil, who was absent and could not now be dealt with, he at once set about arriving at a more complete knowledge of what had taken place between his young wife and the wily Oriental. Sitting on the edge of the couch he put his arms round Nouna, drew her to him, and calmed her outburst of tearful petulance with tender, yearning caresses, so fond, so warm, with such depths of almost paternal protectiveness toning down and mingling with the ardent passion of the lover, that her fitful nature was soothed in a very few moments, and her arms made instinctively for his neck again as a baby turns to its mother's breast, and the tears dried on her cheeks as she began to smile up confidently into his face.

"Now, little wife, tell me," he whispered, looking down into her eyes with the steady fire of a man's noblest, strongest love, before which a woman's weak fears and suspicions could not but melt and wither, "do you believe I want to make your life unhappy? Do you think I shall be hard and cruel to you, and deprive you of anything that can please you? Look up, look up, and tell me if you think so!"

She looked up, transformed by the love-touch, the love-speech, into a little spirit of fire and light, burning into his heart and flesh with an irresistible, intoxicating strength of feverish, though fitful passion. As her lips pressed his, as her fingers glided with slow, voluptuous touch till they ruffled his curly hair and clasped each other behind his head, he forgot his intention, forgot his suspicious fears, enthralled by the bliss of possession of the first woman he had ever loved and longed for. It was not until the passion-fire began to fade in Nouna's eyes, and she slid languidly down from his neck, and drawing his arms about her so as to support her best in the position she chose, nestled against him with closing eyes, while a long sigh of perfect and complete

happiness rose to her parted lips, seemed to quiver along her form, and then died slowly away, that his doubts and fears surged up again in the midst of his own intoxication of pleasure, and, with difficulty steadying himself to the task, he framed a form of words in which to resume his interrogatory.

"Listen, Nouna," he said, with an inevitable touch of hardness in his effort at self-control; "I want you to tell me all that happened after you drove off with Mr. Angelo from the church-door to-day."

"Oh!" she exclaimed in a long wail of weary disgust at the obtrusive inquiry, "you don't want to worry me about that *now*, do you? I'll tell you all about it some other time."

And she flung her arms back over her head, and laughed up at him through the ivory frame in lazy witchery. Finding, however, that he remained firm and would not look down at her, she changed her attitude, and, by a quick, lithe movement, twined herself coaxingly about him. George gave scarcely a sign of the fierce conflict that was going on within him, between the despotic, wickedly used power this little creature was trying to establish over him, and his own manful determination to assume without delay his rightful lordship. For this once he had the mastery, keeping lip and limb under firm control, and disentangling himself from her arms to hold her away from him, he looked steadily, but with a most loving reserve of tenderness in his eyes, into her half-petulant, half-reproachful face.

"Tell me now, darling, and then we'll kiss all thoughts of it away."

Whereat she made a spring at him to anticipate the reward. But seeing that, instead of lighting up with the flame she wanted to see in them again, his eyes retained the steady, searching look, which moreover seemed to become more grimly resolute for her evasions, she turned to tearfulness, and without actually crying, moaned out in a most melancholy voice, and with a woman's natural love of piling on the agony, that he had better kill her, since it was plain he did not love her.

"Come, darling, you know better than that," said he gently. "But I am your husband, and you must tell me what I wish to know."

It may be easily imagined that he was becoming madly

anxious and suspicious under all these evasions, which seemed to denote that she had something to hide more serious than he supposed. Finding all her artifices useless, and failing in an angry struggle to escape from his arms, she proceeded to unfasten all her bracelets, to tear out her diamond lizard, and after piling them in a heap in her lap, to toss them all with a sudden, violent jerk on to the floor at her husband's feet.

"There!" said she triumphantly, "will that satisfy you?"

"Not at all," said George very quietly. "I should have had them off long ago if I had wanted to. Who gave them to you?"

She noticed the increasing sternness of his tone and answered with a sudden quick change to childish fright.

"I had them all the time. Mamma sent them to me weeks ago, by Mr. Angelo," she added with a rapid inspiration.

Without any sign or word which seemed to her significant enough for a warning, George's self-restraint gave way, and grasping her shoulders so firmly in his hands that she could not move to right or left, he forced her to meet his eyes, now flaming with anger, with her own.

"Tell me the truth," he said in a tone she had never heard him use before.

"I dare not, I dare not," she whispered in terrible, exaggerated fear that took all colour from her face and lips and made her dark skin an ugly ashy grey.

He relaxed his clasp at once, remorseful and ashamed; but his voice was no softer than before. "Who gave you those jewels? Was it Rahas?"

She looked up rapidly, with a convincing ray of relief in her eyes. "Oh, no, no, no. It was mamma, mamma, mamma. They were her wedding present to me."

George put his hand up to his forehead, and found that it was wet. A great dread had gone from his mind, yet he remained much puzzled.

"Then why couldn't you tell me so at once?" he asked doubtfully.

"Why, it's no use hiding it now. Rahas brought them, and he said I was to say I had had them before, because it would make you so angry to know he'd been here."

He had got at the truth at last, he believed, but he was still far from satisfied.

"Don't you know, Nouna," he said more gently, putting his arm round her again, "that you must not see people your husband doesn't wish you to see?"

"But I couldn't help it," cried Nouna, evidently surprised at seeing him calm down so rapidly. "Mr. Angelo didn't come in, he drove off at once, and when I had been waiting here a little while all by myself there was a knock and I ran down stairs, thinking it must be you. I had been eating strawberries, so I hadn't seen who it was coming. And it was Rahas, and when I saw him, I said, 'No, I must not speak to you,' and I wanted to shut the door. But he would not let me; he said he had a message and something for me from mamma, and he showed me a packet with her handwriting on it. So I said 'Oh, give it me,' and he said he must come in and speak to me. And I said I would not see him alone, I would wait till my husband came. Yes, I said 'my husband,' I did, just like that," and she drew herself up and spoke with great dignity. "And the landlady came up just then to answer the door, so I ran back and called to her, 'Mrs. Lauriston is not at home,' and I went up stairs and looked through the curtains and saw him go away looking all doubled up, as he does when he is very angry. And I felt afraid, and wished you would come, and I wished I had brought my kitten—I felt so lonely. Oh, it seemed such a long, long time; I began to think you were sorry you had married me and thought you would never come back at all, and I should be a widow, and I couldn't eat any more strawberries when I thought that. And I pulled out the roses I had fastened in my dress and tore them to pieces. Look!" And she pointed to a spot near the piano, strewn with crimson and lemon-coloured petals. "Then at last a cab drove up and I rushed to the window; and it was Rahas again, but with Sundran. And I was so wretched and lonely that if he had been alone I must have seen him then. And I ran down and let them in and brought them up. And Sundran—oh, how she cried, poor thing, and told me such dreadful stories about English husbands; how they say they love you, and then if you displease them ever so little they throw you down on the floor and run away, and you never see them again; and she begged me to go away with her, and said Rahas would take care we should not starve."

At this, George, without interrupting her, decided that his

former suspicion that Sundran had been bought by Rahas was confirmed, and resolved to stop all further intercourse between his wife and the Indian woman without delay.

Nouna continued, with her eyes full of tears at the remembrance : "Then she knelt at my feet and kissed them while Rahas gave me the diamonds and a little note inside them from mamma, saying they were her wedding present, and I should have a better one by and by if I was happy with my husband. And I thought this strange, and said out loud : 'What does she mean ?' And when I looked up I saw Rahas staring at me with his eyes just like the coals in a fire. And I don't know why, but I was frightened, and I was glad Sundran was there—perhaps it's being married that makes me feel different, for I never felt like that before. And I read the note to the end, and did not say any more, and just then another ring came at the bell, and Rahas started up and rushed out. But it was only your telegram, and he came back—for he had gone up the stairs ; and when he found you were not coming back at once, he asked if he might stay a little, and I should not feel so lonely. And I didn't want him to, I didn't indeed, but he stayed, and he made Sundran go to the window and watch for your coming."

George could not resist a savage exclamation below his breath.

Nouna went on : "He made me hate him, for he said I should be very unhappy presently, he was afraid ; for Englishmen were hard and cruel, and not loving. And he told me not to tell you he had been here, because you knew he would do anything for me, and perhaps you would strike me. But if I wanted him or wanted my mother, he could always let me see her at any time, and be always ready to do what I wished, as he had always been. And he said I was to forget his words now, if I liked, but was to remember them if I ever felt lonely and desolate. And he said I need not trouble about knowing where he was, for by the sympathy and power he had over me he should always be near just when I wanted him. And I said : 'What if I tell my husband ?' And he said it would not matter ; you would not find him. But I had better not tell you, because you would be so angry with me. And while he was talking Sundran called out that she saw a cab coming, and quickly like an arrow he kissed my hand and

went out of the room ; and I saw him go down a little street in front just as you came up. There, now I have told you all, all. Kiss me, tell me you are satisfied."

He kissed her, and put her on his knee, and smoothed her soft dark hair ; but he gave himself up to no abandonment of love, and when he spoke it was in a subdued and rather doubtful tone.

"I am not at all satisfied, Nouna, because I think it is a very bad beginning when a wife tries to deceive her husband on her wedding-day. If I hadn't caught sight of Rahas and heard you talking to Sundran I should have believed what you pleased to tell me about the jewels, and never have guessed that either of them had been here."

"Well, that would have been much better, for then you wouldn't have been worried, and you wouldn't have made me cry," said she with conviction.

George had another sudden and vivid perception of the stumbling-blocks that stood in the way of her moral education.

"I would rather, little one," he said gravely, "pass days full of worry and nights without sleep than think it possible you could tell me a falsehood."

She looked in his face wonderingly, and then patted his cheek and laughed.

"Well, I don't want to tell you falsehoods," she said indifferently, and then paused, having at that moment discovered a new and delightful pastime in brushing up his moustache the wrong way with her finger, and laughing at the effect. "What a beautiful mouth you've got!" she exclaimed suddenly, in ardent and sincere admiration. "It's smaller than mine, I think," she continued dubiously, and she proceeded gravely to take the measurement of the one against the other, with a wicked look out of her eyes as they came close to his which made George suspect while he yielded to the temptation, that it had been deliberately formed to put an end to a discussion which the little lady found very tedious.

CHAPTER XIV

THE moral fibre of a man as deeply in love as George was is not at its strongest on his wedding day.

So he gave up in despair his first lesson in the moral duties, and whispered to her such pretty babble as comes up to the lips of all lovers in the first day of their happiness, and, being perfectly happy and inclined at all issues to be satisfied with his bargain, it was some time before he noticed that his bride's interest in his love-prattle was growing fainter and fainter, until at last she scarcely gave more, as her share of the conversation, then an occasional nod or a weary little smile.

"Are you tired, dearest?" he asked solicitously, wakening suddenly to a consciousness that all was not well with her, as she began to move restlessly about in his arms, and her eyes roved round the room as if she found it impossible to keep her attention fixed on what he was saying.

"No, no," she answered hastily, and she clasped her arms round his neck again, but with a distinct subsidence of her first outbursts of spontaneous affection.

George began to be alarmed. Was she tired of him already? Could she, child as she was, find his caresses irksome within ten hours of her wedding? He tried to persuade himself that it was only his fancy which made her small face look drawn and weary in the warm soft light of the afternoon sun, until he noticed some little puckers about her mouth like the premonitory symptoms of a child's outburst of tears.

"What is it, Nouna, my darling, tell me?" he whispered tenderly.

She shook her head feebly, but then, her steadfastness giving way, she put up her lips to his ear, and murmured in a shamefaced broken voice: "I'm so hungry!"

"Hungry!" he repeated with a great shock.

"Yes," answered she, beginning to whimper now that the effort was over, and the confession made. "I overslept myself this morning, and had to come away without any breakfast. And I ate all those little tiny sandwiches as soon as I got here, and I've had nothing since except strawberries!" At this climax of her tale of distress she broke down, and sobbed gently while George picked her up in his arms, and carrying her to the bell, rang violently.

"What would you like, my dearest?" he asked, when the landlady, who was a very superior creature indeed, but who felt that a bride was interesting enough to condone the condescension, appeared in person.

"Oh, some tea, I should like some tea, and—and anything I can have at once!"

"What can my wife have at once?" asked George, with all a young husband's joy in the words "my wife."

"Well, sir, would she like a chop? Do you think, ma'am, you could fancy a chop?"

"Oh, yes, I *should* like a chop!" cried poor Nouna hungrily, rather to the surprise, even then, of her husband, who was more prepared to hear her ask for the wing of a partridge, or a couple of plovers' eggs.

Upon reflection, however, it could not but occur to him that even a particularly small and dainty-looking bride may reasonably be expected to need some solid food between the hours of half-past seven in the morning and close upon six in the afternoon, and he lamented his own idiotcy in not making proper provision for this. The landlady, who had taken for granted, on receiving no orders for dinner, that her new lodgers intended to dine out, behaved with great energy on discovering the mistake. Without obliging them to wait very long, she translated "chop" into a very tempting dish of cutlets and *pommes sautées*, and supplemented that with a tart, sent for hastily from a pastrycook's, in the enjoyment of which repast Nouna got uproariously happy, and told George that she thought being married was "lovely." To hear herself called "Mrs. Lauriston" by the landlady who came up ostensibly to apologise, but really to get another look at the little bride, threw her into such ecstasies of delight that she could not answer any question to which those magic words were added. When the pineapple, which she had left untouched because she did not know how

to handle it, was placed upon the table, the servant asked what was to be done with "the black woman" who, she said, was becoming very restless and unhappy, and wanted to see "her little missee mistress."

"Let her come up at once," said Nouna quickly. Then, as soon as the maid had shut the door, she threw herself into her husband's arms and began to coax him to let Sundran stay.

To this George objected in the strongest manner ; but she begged so hard, she assured him so plaintively that she was not used to waiting on herself, scouting the idea that he could replace her maid, and reminding him with tears in her eyes that he could not refuse her first request after leaving her alone on her wedding day and returning to make her cry as he had done, that the young husband could not steel himself to that most desirable point of obduracy, and, entirely against his will and to his own inward rage, he gave permission for Sundran to remain "for a few days." It was a pretty and characteristic trait in the wilful young creature that she clung, even in the midst of the novel excitements of her marriage, to the old servant who had loved her and served her since her babyhood ; but it could not but cause the young husband pain and even a feeling akin to jealousy to learn that he was not all to her that she just now was to him. He bore the Indian woman's blessings and thanks as well as he could, when Nouna embraced her and told her that she must love Mr. Lauriston, he was good, not like other Englishmen, and he would let her stay.

"For a few days, until she gets used to managing for herself," murmured poor George explanatorily.

But the excited woman refused to hear or to heed this provision. He wished Sundran in—India within the next half hour ; for Nouna, in whose mind the consciousness that by marrying she had done something irrevocable, not yet fully understood, was just waking a childish dread which made her cling to the old, well-known face with a new tenacity, insisted on retaining the Indian up stairs, and asked her all sorts of affectionate questions concerning "Mammy Ellis," who, she learned, had been in a great fright about her, but had been comforted by a letter from the Countess, who, she said, had treated her very handsomely. Nouna, whose smiles had been on the borders of tears all day, cried a little at this mention of her mother, and on looking up again

after drying her eyes found that Sundran, whether or not acting on a mute suggestion from George, had discreetly retired. Her tears ceased instantly, like those of a naughty little nursery tyrant when "papa" comes in ; and George, respecting this sudden shyness of a girl whose heart he knew he had scarcely as yet half conquered, went straight to the piano, opened it, and began to sing snatches of love-songs to a very fair improvised accompaniment by way of paying his court to her in a less obtrusive manner.

The device succeeded admirably. George was by no means a great singer. A respectable baritone voice in a perfect state of non-cultivation is a very common gift among young men ; but there was enough passion and poetry awake in his heart to-night for a suggestion of something more interesting than the straightforward bawling of the ordinary singing Englishman to find its way to his lips and vibrate in the notes of "Lady, wake, bright stars are beaming." It is needless to say that his ears were well open to every sound behind him, and that he felt all the significance of the soft creaking of the casters as Nouna drew her arm-chair, little by little, close up to him, until at last she leaned on the end of the piano by the bass notes and watched his face with a furtive wide-eyed scrutiny which he was careful not to divert by appearing to notice its intensity. Unable to keep his eyes off her face altogether, he took care that the yearning, passionate glances he cast at her should be so rapid as to leave on her mind the impression that they were a result of the intoxication produced by his own song, instead of the song being the result of the intoxication produced by the glances. He saw that she was in a more deeply thoughtful mood than he had yet seen her in during their short acquaintance ; and he wanted her to give spontaneous speech to her thoughts, and thus to gain an insight into that mysterious recess of which he knew so little—her mind. At last, when he had come to the last note of the "Ständchen" out of Schubert's *Winterreise*, which he sang with more passion, if with less sentiment than an artist would have thrown into the beautiful melody, he turned to her and attempted to embrace her. But she shook him off, saying imperiously :

"Go on. I like it. It helps me to think."

Perhaps this was scarcely the comment he hoped or expected, but the repulse was passionate, not unsympathetic or chilling ; and George laid his hands obediently again on

the instrument with only one longing, inspiring look at the lovely, flexible face. Then he sang Beethoven's "Adelaide," with a strange effect. For the well-worn song was quite new to Nouna, and as it proceeded it seemed to George that the spirit of the passionate music called to her and found an answering echo, for her long black eyes grew soft and liquid, like water under the trees on a summer night, and when the last word was sung and the last note played, she lifted herself in her chair, and held out her arms in irresistible invitation.

"What does the song make you feel?" he asked, whispering, with his arms round her. He began already rashly to feel assured that the low-minded sensual Rahas was wrong; she must have a soul, since she was so susceptible to fine music; than which conclusion nothing could be more futile, as a more enlarged artistic acquaintance would have proved to him.

"It makes me feel that I love you," she answered, unconsciously touching the root of many pretty fallacies concerning the noble influence of music on devotion. For if she had been better educated she would have said "it raised her, took her out of herself," and would have delayed her illustration of the fact that it only raised her far enough to throw her in the arms of the nearest affectionately disposed person.

George felt rather disappointed, having founded his ideas of women upon a ceremonious acquaintance with less ingenuous specimens of the sex. But if she was more unsophisticated than the everyday young ladies he had met, she was certainly more bewitching, and presently the thoughtful mood came over her again, and she looked up into his face with the searching expression that had shone in her eyes when she first came to him at the piano.

"I have been looking at you while you played, and I have been thinking," she said gravely.

"Well, what did you think?"

"I have been thinking that we shall not be happy."

George was at heart rather startled. The words echoed too strongly certain misgivings which had from time to time oppressed him in the course of the day for him not to feel that they bore some of the weight of sagacious prediction. But he would not for the world have acknowledged this to her.

"Don't you love me then, my wife?" he asked slowly, in a voice so sweet, so thrilling, that Nouna listened to the words just as she had done to his singing. "If you do you cannot be anything but happy, for you are the very breath of my life to me; to be with you is happiness enough for me; and just as your body is mine now to cherish and defend, so your very soul shall become a part of mine, and my joy in you shall be your joy, till every pleasure I feel shall thrill through you, and every distinction I win shall make you glow with pride."

She watched his face with all seriousness as he spoke, and then shook her head.

"I love you," she said, "but not in your way."

"You don't know me yet. A woman's love grows more slowly than a man's, more reasonably, perhaps; but you will learn to love me as I wish, you can't help yourself, I will be so good to you. You are only a child. I can wait."

"Ah," she said, half sorrowfully, half amused. "There is where you are wrong. If I were English, I should perhaps be still a child. But I'm not; I'm a woman." She looked at him steadily, in deep earnest, stopping in her play with her white sash, and shaking her hair free from his touch to impress upon him that he must listen to her with attention. "You think I shall be something different by and by. Perhaps I shall; I never know what I am going to be, or what I am going to do. But I do know I shall never be what you want—always the same, always loving. I never love anybody without hating them too sometimes. Sometimes I hate Sundran, and often Mammy Ellis, and I shall hate you when you frown at me."

"But I sha'n't frown at you."

"Yes, you will. You'll frown when I long for more jewellery, when I say I hate England and wish I was back in India; and you'll frown more when I forget that I'm married and laugh and amuse myself just as I used to do."

"I shouldn't like you to forget you are my wife, certainly," said George, troubled for a moment. "But then I won't give you much chance of forgetting it, my darling."

The evening ended peacefully after the events and storms of the day, each feeling that they had a better understanding of each other, and yet each acknowledging that they still had much more to learn than they had expected. But that night, long after Nouna, tired out, had gone happily and

peacefully to sleep in his arms, George lay awake, and acknowledged mournfully to himself that he had made a bad beginning. He had shown want of self-control over the diamonds and Rahas's visit, he had shown weakness in letting Sundran stay, and he recognised vividly that the dignity of husband required a very long list of qualities for the proper maintenance of the character. A little more conduct like that of to-day, and the young wife to whom he ought to be as a sun-god, a model of what was right and noble, would begin to despise him, and all would be over. They would sink at once to the level of the ordinary cavilling, cooing young couple whom every new-made husband so heartily contemns. George fell asleep resolved to inaugurate a new *régime* of immaculate firmness and forbearance in the morning.

But how could he have reckoned upon the irresistible charm of a waking woman, fresh after the night's sleep as an opening rose, all smiles, blushes, babbling girlish confidences, sweet reticences, a creature a thousand times more bewitching, more beautiful, than in his hottest young man's dreams he had ever imagined a mortal could be? Her loveliness dazzled, intoxicated him; spaces of time which a week before were called hours passed like brief seconds in her society. He tore himself from her side too late: for the first time he was late for parade. On the following morning it was Nouna herself who hurried him off, and he was charmed with this dutiful wifeliness until he was suddenly startled out of all attention to an order from his superior officer by the appearance of his wife, in a white dress and the baby-bonnet he had bought for her, on the parade-ground.

As for the Colonel, the unexpected apparition of this extraordinary little figure had an almost ghastly effect upon him. George saw him glaring at the poor child as if her white drapery had been the flimsy garment of an authentic ghost.

"Who brought that girl here? Tell her she has no business on the parade-ground," said Lord Florencécourt in an almost brutal tone.

Much incensed, George rode forward with a crimson face, and saluting, said: "Colonel, that lady is my wife."

He did not notice the rapid movement of curiosity and excitement which his announcement made among such of

the other officers as stood near. They had all looked at the girl's pretty face with surprise and admiration, but the information that she was the wife of a comrade produced upon them much the same effect that the discovery of a fox in an animal they had taken for a rabbit would have on a group of hunting-men.

But George's attention was wholly absorbed by the strange demeanour of Lord Florencecourt, who seemed to have forgotten all about his marriage, for he started and stared at him with a fierce amazement utterly bewildering to the younger man.

"Your wife!" he echoed in a low voice. And he faced Lauriston with a searching look, which the young lieutenant met steadily.

They stood like this for some moments, each finding it hard to control his seething anger. The Colonel, as became the elder man and commanding officer, recovered himself first, and told George curtly that, as parade was over, he had better rejoin his wife and lead her off the ground. This suggestion the young man was glad enough to take, and he saluted and rode off without a word, still in a state of hot indignation. The sight of Massey and Dicky Wood standing beside his wife, evidently both doing their best to make themselves agreeable to her, and succeeding to all appearances very well, did not tend to soothe him, and on reaching the spot where they stood, he swung himself off his charger in a most unamiable mood. He had self-command enough left not to reproach her in the presence of his comrades, but the tone in which he said, without taking any notice of them, "Come up to my rooms, Nouna," and the young wife's sudden pallor at his words caused the two young fellows to exchange significant looks, which both Lauriston and his wife unluckily saw, expressive of fear that the poor little lady was going to have "a bad time of it."

At the door of the officers' quarters they came upon the Colonel, who was looking as uncompromisingly fierce as ever. He examined Nouna from head to foot with a straightforward aggressive scrutiny which made George's blood boil, while his wife, for her part, stopped short to return his stare with equally simple directness.

"George, who is he?" she asked suddenly in a low eager voice, turning to her husband as he put his arm brusquely within hers to lead her past.

"Lord Florencecourt, the Colonel," he whispered back, in an important tone, hoping that the officer's position would impress her sufficiently for her to awake to her want of respect.

But before George could see what effect his words might have, the Colonel himself, who was looking very haggard and grizzled this morning, an object grim enough to arrest any woman's attention, broke into the whispered conversation with brusque coldness. He had not lost a word of the rapid question and answer, and a slight change passed over his ashen gray face as if the blood were flowing more freely again, as he noted the unconcern with which the lady heard the announcement of his name.

"Pray introduce me to your wife, Lauriston," he said in such a hard voice that the request became an abrupt command, without taking his eyes from her face for one second. "Perhaps, indeed, we have met before. Mrs. Lauriston seems to know me. In that case I hope she will pardon my short memory."

"No, I haven't met you," said Mrs. Lauriston hastily, looking at him with open aversion and turning to take her husband's arm as if she considered the hardly-formed acquaintance already too long.

"Then my memory is better than yours, I am sure," said he, with a ghastly attempt to assume his usual society manner. "What was Mrs. Lauriston's maiden name?" he asked, turning to the young lieutenant.

"Miss Weston, Nouna Weston," answered George, with growing curiosity and interest.

The Colonel's face remained impassive as wood.

"Ah! Any relation to Sir Edward Weston, the architect?"

"Are you, Nouna?"

"I never heard of him," said the girl, while her eyes remained fixed, with the fascination of repulsion, on the Colonel's hard, lined face. "My father was Captain Weston, and he died in India; I don't know anything else."

"You came here this morning to see your husband drill?"

"Yes."

"Ah!" The Colonel seemed to be revolving something in his mind, and he looked again at Nouna for a moment doubtfully, as if uncertain whether to ask her another

question. However, he refrained from doing so, and only said, still coldly but with a perceptible diminution of harshness: "I must apologise for detaining you, Mrs. Lauriston, but your husband is such an old friend of mine that I could not resist the temptation of making your acquaintance on the first opportunity."

With a formal salute the Colonel retreated, and George hastened up stairs to his rooms with his wife to take off his uniform. At any other time Nouna would have found great delight in immediately trying on his sash and drawing his sword; but the encounter with the Colonel, while it had one good result in averting her husband's displeasure with her for following him to the barracks, had damped her spirits in a very marked fashion.

"George, how could you say that the Colonel was nice?" she asked almost before the gentleman in question was out of earshot. "I think he is the most horribly cold, hard man I ever met. It is quite right for him to be a soldier; he looked as if he wished I were the enemy and he could hack at me."

"Nonsense, child," said George. "He thought he had met you before, that's all. And you looked at him in the same way. Are you sure you never saw him until to-day?" he asked curiously; for he had been struck by the puzzled interchange of scrutinizing looks, and was still rather anxiously in the dark as to the circumstances of his wife's life before he met her.

"Quite sure," said Nouna slowly, looking straight before her and trying to pierce the gloom of old memories. "I seem to have seen somebody a little like him, I don't know when and I don't know where, but I am sure I have never before to-day seen him himself. Why, George, he is too horrid to forget!"

And with a start and a little shiver of dislike, she dismissed the subject and bounded across the room to play like a kitten with the ends of her husband's sash.

CHAPTER XV.

EVEN in the intoxication of the first few days of married life, George Lauriston had not forgotten his resentment against Rahas, in whom he could not fail to see a subtle enemy to his domestic happiness. On the morning after his marriage he had called at the house in Mary Street, and was not at all surprised to be told by the servant that Mr. Rahas had gone away. He insisted on seeing the elder merchant Fanah, who, however, only confirmed the woman's statement by saying that his nephew had gone to France on business of the firm. It flashed through George's mind that this sudden journey abroad might be with the object of visiting Nouna's mother, with whom it was plain the young merchant had some rather mysterious undertaking; but the next moment he rejected this idea, being more inclined to the opinion that the Countess, for some unknown reason, was anxious to have it believed that she was further off than in truth she was.

He next went up to Messrs. Smith and Angelo's offices, saw the elder partner and laid before him a vigorous remonstrance with Madame di Valdestillas for employing a foreign scoundrel (as George did not scruple to call Rahas) who dared not show his face to the husband, as her messenger to a young wife. The old lawyer listened as passively as usual, and recommended the indignant young officer to write to the Countess on the subject.

"And if you will take a word of advice," ended the old lawyer, his eyes travelling slowly round the sepulchral office as he rubbed his glasses, "write temperately, much more temperately than you have spoken to me. The Condesa is a very passionate woman, and while she is all generosity and sweetness to those she honours with her regard, she is

liable to be offended if she is not approached in the right way."

"I don't care whether she is offended or not," burst out George, with all the righteous passion of outraged marital dignity, "and her generosity and sweetness are nothing to me. She seems to have a very odd idea of what a husband should be—" At this point Mr. Smith, who was smiling blandly in a corner of the office, drew his mouth in suddenly, with a sort of gasp of horror, which he smothered as his partner's eyes, without any appearance of hurry or any particular expression in them, rested for a moment on his face. George meanwhile went on without pause,—“if she thinks he will stand any interference between his wife and himself. She has done her best to ruin her daughter by her fantastic bringing up——”

"Oh, hush! hush!" interposed Mr. Angelo, while his sensitive partner absolutely writhed as if it were he himself who was being thus scathingly censured.

George continued: "But she is quite mistaken if she thinks she can treat her in the same way now. Nouna is my wife, and if I catch any other messenger, black, or white, or grey, humbugging about trying to see her without my knowledge, I'll horsewhip him within an inch of his life, if he were sent by fifty mothers!"

A curious incident occurred at this point. There was an instant's perfect silence in the room. George was standing with his back to the door of Mr. Angelo's private office. No sound was audible but the nervous scraping of Mr. Smith's feet on the carpet, and a subdued clearing of the throat from Mr. Angelo. The young husband was too passionately excited to take note of either face, and both partners kept their eyes carefully lowered as if they heard the outburst under protest. Yet in the pause, without any conscious reason, George turned suddenly and saw against the glass upper panel of the door, the outline of a woman's bonnet, with a small plume of feathers on the left side. He turned again immediately and faced the lawyers with an entire change of manner. Feeling a strong conviction now that he had a larger and a more important audience than he had imagined, with a flash of self-command he controlled his anger, and spoke in a firm, clear, earnest voice, each word ringing out as if he were giving a solemn command.

"Perhaps," he said, "I am judging too harshly. I

mustn't blame any one for loving unwisely ; I haven't yet shown that I can love wisely myself. But I wish Madame di Valdestillas to know—I beg you to let her know—that I have taken upon myself, with all solemnity before God, the duty she was not herself able to fulfil, of cherishing Nouna and shielding her with the influence of a home. I ask you also to beg her not to send Nouna any more costly presents, like the diamonds Rahas brought ; they only make the poor child long for a chance to show them off, and it will be years and years before I can put her in a position to wear them without being ridiculous. I'm sure if Madame di Valdestillas were to know that, she loves her child much too well not to see that I am right."

George paused, keeping quite still. For a moment there was no sound at all, and both the lawyers refrained from looking at him. At last with a gentle cough, to intimate that he had well weighed this speech and that he expected as much weight to be given to his answer, Mr. Angelo answered :

"I quite understand the integrity of your motives, Mr. Lauriston, and I believe I may answer for it that the Condesa di Valdestillas, when I have laid your arguments before her, will respect them as fully as I do. But I believe it is not now premature for me to confess that circumstances may arise which will make it not only possible, but desirable that Mrs. Lauriston should grow accustomed to the wearing of jewels suitable to a lady not only of position, but of wealth." George looked steadily at him, in some perplexity. "The fact is, Mr. Lauriston," and Mr. Angelo's eyes travelled round the room and then rested for a moment in dull and fish-like impenetrability on the young man's face before they continued their circuit, "that Madame di Valdestillas's first husband left property to a considerable amount which he willed to his wife, but with the condition that if she married again it should go to their daughter. Now Madame di Valdestillas, as you are aware, has married again, and the property would thus have fallen to Mrs. Lauriston without question if it had not been for one circumstance. Some relatives of the late Captain Weston's have propounded a later will, benefiting them to the exclusion of his wife and daughter. Now we have the strongest reasons for believing the will thus suddenly sprung upon us to be a forgery ; but until the trial, which is to take place

shortly, we cannot be absolutely sure of our case. In the meantime the Countess thought it better not too soon to hold out expectations which might never be realized. It is quite on my own responsibility therefore, that I have made this communication to you. It will explain what would certainly otherwise seem rather mysterious conduct with regard to the present of jewels to her daughter."

"It seems to me rather mysterious still," said George shortly and uneasily. This network of strange occurrences and explanations that seemed to him quite as strange, perplexed the straightforward young soldier. "I'm not such a fool as not to value money, but frankly I'd rather be without a great deal than think my wife had a fortune which would make her independent of me. In any case I ought to have been told the whole position of things before I married her."

He took up his hat and after very few more words left the office, on all points less satisfied than when he entered it. He hated humbug, and this foreign Countess's playing with him, even if it arose from nothing but a woman's love of little mysteries, was exceedingly distasteful to him. He had acted in the promptest and most upright way towards Nouna, such as might have convinced any reasonable person of his integrity, yet in no respect had he met with corresponding frankness on her side. If he had been told before of the young girl's possibly brilliant prospects, it would have changed many things for him; now that the suggestion was suddenly sprung upon him late in the day, he found that he could not adjust himself to the notion of Nouna rich, distracted in the first flush of the honeymoon by the startling news that she was a wealthy woman, with a host of luxurious pleasures at her command outside such simpler, more domestic happiness as her husband could give her. And he resolved that, as she did not know of the sensational prospect that might open before her, he would himself say nothing about it, but would wait until the will case was tried, and the matter finally settled in one way or the other.

George Lauriston, having held himself till now rather markedly aloof from the influence of feminine fascination, was now expiating his neglect in daily tightening bondage at the feet of the most irresistible little tyrant that ever captivated a man's senses and wormed her way into his

heart, none the less that he saw daily with increasing clearness how much more he was giving her than she was giving, or perhaps could give, to him. George was puzzled and disappointed. Arguing from his personal experience, in which the ecstatic dreams and timid caresses of the lover had been but a weak prelude to the ardent and demonstrative tenderness of the young husband, he had taken it for granted that those pretty, capricious outbursts of girlish passion, which had charmed him so much by their piquant unusualness, would develop under the sunshine of happy matrimony into a rich growth of steady affection, coloured by the tropical glow which seemed to belong to her individuality, and cherished and fed by his own devotion. It almost seemed sometimes as if marriage had had the effect of checking her spontaneous effusiveness, as if she was rather afraid of the violent demonstrations which any encouragement would bring down upon her. Now George, at three-and-twenty, could scarcely be expected to be much of a philosopher; and finding in his own case that true love was indeed all-absorbing, he saw no reason for doubting the common belief that true love must always be so. Only at a much later stage of experience does one understand that into that vaguely described state of being "in love" enter many questions of race, complexion, age, sex, and circumstances, which produce as many varieties of that condition as there are men and women who pass through it. So he fell ignorantly into the mistake of thinking that he had not yet succeeded in wholly winning his wife's heart, and greatly tormented both himself and her by laborious and importunate efforts to obtain what was, as a matter of fact, safely in his possession.

Nouna loved her husband as a bee loves the flowers, or a kitten the warmth of the sun. He was the prince she had waited for to take her out of the dull twilight of life with Mrs. Ellis and music-lessons; and although, in the modest nest which was all he could yet make for her, there were missing many of the elements upon which she had counted in her imaginary paradise, yet who knew what glories might not be in store for her in the rapidly approaching time when George would be a General and wear a cocked hat? And in the meantime he was the handsomest man in the world, and kinder and sweeter than anybody had ever been to her; though when she looked into his eyes and sighed

with voluptuous delight at the lights in them, and at their colour and brilliancy, in truth she read in them little more than any dog can read in the eyes of his master, and she alternated her moods of passionate satisfaction in her new toy with moods in which she openly wished that she were not yet married to him, so that she might have all the novelty and excitement of the wedding over again.

And George, who in his efforts to resist the temptation of becoming a mere slave to this little princess's caprices, ran a risk of becoming a later and worse Mr. Barlow, decided that, in the shallow education she had received, the intellectual and spiritual sides of her nature had been too much neglected, and set about remedying these omissions in a furiously energetic manner. He was beset by many interesting difficulties. To begin with : what pursuit could be imagined so pleasant and at the same time so improving as reading for filling up the hours during which he was forced to be absent from her? But Nouna lightly, firmly, and persistently refused to read one line even of a judiciously chosen novel, although George had taken care to tempt her by a set of beautifully bound volumes by a lady writer who took a decorously vague and colourless view of life through Anglican-Catholic spectacles. She would look out of window by the hour, lie on the sofa listening to the songs and tales of Sundran, whom George hated himself for his weakness in not dismissing, even catch flies on the window-panes and give them to the cat, anything rather than open a book. She would, indeed, permit George to read to her, lying curled up in his arms and hearing for the most part without comment, unless he chose poetry. In this region she showed marked preferences and prejudices. Shakspeare, she averred, made her head ache, with the exception of certain chosen passages, which she would hear again and again, strung together in odd fashion. She was never tired of the love-scenes in *Romeo and Juliet*, but she would not permit the intervening scenes to be read, preferring a short summary in George's own words to fill up the blanks thus made in the story. *Othello* she would suffer in the same way, and *King Lear*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *The Taming of the Shrew* ; and she was never tired of the description of the death of Ophelia. The *Idylls of the King* she preferred for the most part without the poetry, but she learned by heart *The Lady of Shalott*, *The Moated Grange*,

and other pieces which presented ladies in a picturesque and romantic light. Some portions of *Hiawatha* had a strong fascination for her, and as, again and again, George read to her the account of the death of Minne-haha, he would feel her arms tighten round his neck, and hear her breath come short with intense interest and emotion close to his ear.

"Would you feel like that if I died?" she asked abruptly one evening, laying her hand across the page when he had read to the end.

"My child, my child, don't ask me," whispered George, overcome and thrown off his balance by a sudden realisation of the strong hold this little fragile woman-creature had got upon his whole nature, of the paralysing dead blank her absence would now make in his life. "I don't think, my wife, that I should live long after you," he said in a grave, deep voice, laying his right hand upon her shoulder, and tightening the clasp of his left arm round her waist.

"Really? Would you die too, like the people in poetry?" she asked, delighted, rubbing her round young cheek against his in appreciation of the appropriateness of his answer. But then, examining him at her leisure, a doubt crossed her mind, and as she spanned the muscles of his arm with her little fingers she shook her head. "A man is so strong, so wise, and has so much more to do in the world than a woman, that I think he could not die off just when it pleased him," she said thoughtfully. "There are always Nounas in the world, I think, just like flies and flowers, and silly useless things like that. If one goes, one knows it must go, and one does not miss it. And a man sees that, and he says, 'Ah, it is a pity!' and then he goes on living, and the grass grows up on the grave, and he forgets. After all it was only a little flower, only a little fly. And so while we are alive we must just be sweet, we must just fly about and buzz, for when the little grave is made we don't leave any trace. That is what I think," ended Nouna with a half-grave, half-playful nod.

But George could not take the speech playfully at all. This light but resolute refusal to take herself in earnest, which he ascribed to the paralysing influence of Eastern traditions, was the great barrier to all higher communion between them than that of caresses. By the expression of his face Nouna scented the sermon from afar, and as he

opened his mouth to speak, she thrust her hand between his lips as a gag, and continued, laughing :

"Don't look like that. I won't hear what you have to say. You may be very wise, but I must be listened to sometimes. Now, I won't let you speak unless you promise to leave off reading and sing to me."

George nodded a promise, unable to resist her, and there was an end to the higher education for that evening.

The second string to the young husband's educational bow was art, in whose refining and ennobling influence he believed dutifully, though without much practical sense of it. He took her to concerts in which she found no acute pleasure, declaring that sitting still so long in one narrow chair tired her, and that she would rather hear him play and sing to her at home. He took her to picture galleries, which would have been a rather penitential exercise for him by himself, but from which he thought her more delicately organized feminine temperament might derive some benefit, "taking it in through the pores" as it were, as boys absorb a love and longing for the hunting-field from the sight of their father's scarlet coat and hunting crop. Now this experiment had more interesting results. The first place he took her to was the Royal Academy, where she examined the pictures in a dazed silence, which George hoped was reflective admiration ; but when they returned home she confessed simply that she did not want to see any more pictures. In the National Gallery, on the other hand, where George took her rather apologetically, with a sort of feeling that this was too "advanced" for her present state of art knowledge, Nouna, at first sight of the frames inclined to be restive, began speedily to show an odd and unexpected pleasure, which deepened before certain Gainsboroughs into childish delight.

"I should like the gentleman who painted that lady to paint me," she said, when she had gazed long and lovingly at one graceful bygone beauty.

George explained the difficulties in the way of her wish, but was highly pleased with the orthodoxy of her taste.

Later experiences, however, gave a shock to this feeling. The National Gallery having effected her reconciliation with pictorial art, Nouna was praiseworthily anxious to learn more of it, and insisted on visiting every exhibition in London. It then gradually became manifest that she had

a marked preference for the works of Continental painters, from the lively delineator of Parisian types of character to the works of the daring artist who presents the figures of sacred history with strong limelight effects.

"They make me see things, and they make me feel things," was all the explanation she could give of the instinctive preferences of her sensuous and poetical temperament.

Even this was not so distressing as her making exceptions to her indifference to English art in the persons of two artists whom George had always been accustomed to consider legitimate butts for satire. The beautiful, mournful women, with clinging draperies, looking out of the canvas with sadly questioning eyes, imaginative conceptions of an artist who has founded a school plentifully lacking in genius, filled Nouna with grave pleasure, and caused her to turn to George in eager demand for sympathy.

"Eh? Do you like them?" said he, surprised. "Why he's the man who started the æsthetic craze; all the women took to starving themselves, and to going about like bundles of limp rags, to look like the gaunt creatures in his pictures."

"That was silly," said Nouna promptly. "The women in the pictures mean something, and they don't care how they look; a woman who just dressed herself up like them would mean nothing, and would care only for how she looked."

George thought this rather a smart criticism, and forgave her peculiar taste on the strength of it; still, he believed himself to be quite on the safe side when he said, taking her arm to point out a picture on the opposite wall by another artist:

"You won't want me to admire that smudge, I hope, Nouna?"

She remained silent, considering it, and then said gravely:—

"It isn't a smudge, it's a lady."

"Well, do you like it?"

"I like her better than the babies, and ladies, and cows, and mountains in the Royal Academy."

"But it takes half an hour to find out what it is."

"That's better than making you wish it wasn't there."

After that George gave her up, and began to perceive

that it would need a critic more apt than he was to deal aright with her perverse but intelligent ignorance.

His third means of developing what was noblest in his wife's character was, of course, religion. George was not religious himself, but it seemed a shocking thing for a woman not to be so, and still more for her to lie under the suspicion of practising the rites of an occult pagan faith. So he took her to church, where she shook with laughter at the curate's appearance and voice, and yawned, and played with her husband's fingers during the sermon.

"Oh, George, how clever it was of you not to laugh at the little man in white!" she cried, with a burst of laughter, at the church-door, when she had hurried down the aisle with indecorous haste. "Now I've been once to please you, you won't make me go again, will you? It reminds me so dreadfully of the horrid Sundays at school."

"Well, but don't you like being in the church where we were married, darling?" he asked gently.

"Oh, but I can remember I'm married to you without going in again," she answered laughing.

And so gradually this desultory musical and religious education dwindled down to visits to Westminster Abbey and the opera; nor could George succeed satisfactorily in establishing in her mind a proper sense of the difference there is between these two kinds of entertainment.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE honeymoon was over, and the London season drawing to a close before the Colonel, who, to Lauriston's great regret, seemed, since that inauspicious introduction to Nouna, to have withdrawn into a permanent coldness towards him, made an attempt to bridge over the restraint which had grown up between them. It was one evening when George, to do honour to a visitor who was a friend of his, had dined at mess, that the Colonel broke silence towards his old favourite, and inviting him, at dessert, to a chair just left vacant by his side, asked if he was still as anxious as ever to get leave for September.

George was rather surprised.

"I am more anxious than ever for it now, sir," he said. Then, seeing that Lord Florencecourt's brows contracted slightly with a displeased air, he added apologetically, "You know, sir, I should not have ventured to ask for more leave this year if you yourself had not been kind enough to propose it. And now my wife is longing for the promised change."

The Colonel instinctively frowned still more at the mention of the obnoxious wife, and after balancing a fruit-knife on his fingers for a few seconds, with his eyes fixed as intently upon it as if the feat were a deeply interesting one, he said very shortly:

"You still intend to go to Norfolk? It's a damp climate, an unhealthy climate—not one suitable to a lady born in India, I should think. Beastly dull, foggy place at all times. Why don't you go to Scarborough?"

George could not remind him that it was he himself who had probably suggested the Millards' invitation, and certainly done his utmost to persuade him to accept it. The knowledge that it was disapproval of his wife which had caused

this sudden change in the Colonel's views, made him suddenly stiff, constrained, and cold.

"I have promised my wife, Colonel; it is too late to change my plans and disappoint her."

The Colonel glanced searchingly up at him from the corners of his eyes, and said almost deprecatingly:

"I see—of course not. I only meant to suggest that the quiet country life the Millards lead might bore her, and, the fact is, our place will not be as lively as usual this year. I shall have some unexpected expenses to meet. I've been warned of them, and they will not be long in coming." Here he paused, gazing still on the table, and seeming not so much to watch as to listen for some sign of comprehension on George's part. "And so," he continued, at last raising his eyes, and speaking in his shortest, bitterest tone, "I shall have to retrench, and there will be no merrymaking at Willingham this year."

"I am very sorry to hear it," said George, puzzled by a swift conjecture that he was expected to make some more significant remark, and wondering what it ought to have been.

He was wishing he could withdraw from this awkward *tête-à-tête*, when, in a low distinct voice, the Colonel struck him into perplexity by the following question:

"How would you like to exchange into the —th, and go over to Ireland?"

"Not at all," answered George, just as low, and very promptly.

He was extremely indignant at this suggestion that he should go into exile just for having pleased himself in the matter of his marriage, which was unmistakably his own affair.

"Would you not if by so doing you could confer a very considerable favour upon one whom you used to be glad to call an old friend?" said the Colonel in the same low voice, and with a strange persistency.

Around them the sounds of laughter and of heated but futile after-dinner discussions, beginning in wine and dying away in cigar-smoke, filled the hot air and rendered their conversation more private and at the same time freer than it could have been if held within closed doors. George looked at the ashy pale face of the prematurely aged officer, and it seemed to him that his own frame shivered as if at

touch of some unexpected mystery, some unknown danger. He answered with much feeling :

“ Tell me why it is a favour, Colonel. I would do more than this to show I am grateful to you. Only let me understand.”

But the very sympathy in his tones seemed to startle the Colonel, who drew back perceptibly, with a hurried glance straight into George's eyes. It seemed to the latter, who was now on the alert for significant looks and tones, that at the moment when their eyes met the Colonel took a desperate resolution. At any rate, when he spoke again it was in his usual manner.

“ It's nothing,” he said, waving the subject away with his hand. “ Nothing but a passing freak which I beg you will not think of again.”

His tone notified that the discussion was closed, and for the whole of the evening George considered, without finding any satisfactory clue to an explanation, what Lord Florencecourt's motive could be for so strongly objecting to Nouna's appearance in the neighbourhood of Willingham. His prejudice against swarthy complexions could scarcely be sufficiently obstinate for him to hope to clear the county of them : but what was the origin of the prejudice?

On returning home George tried to probe the misty memories which the Colonel's appearance had, on his introduction to Nouna, stirred in her mind. But he could elicit nothing further. Nouna was now showing at times little fits of petulance, born of the absence of violent novelty in her life now that the husband was growing to be quite an article of every-day consumption, as much a matter of course as dry toast at breakfast, and she was not going to be troubled to remember or try to remember faces.

“ I dare say I only fancied I ever saw anybody like him,” she said with a little wearied twist of her head and sticking forward of her round chin. “ I can't count every hair on the head of every old gentleman I see.”

And however often he might return to this subject, and in whatever mood she happened to be, George could learn nothing more definite than her first vague impression, which grew even fainter as the meeting faded into the past.

In the meantime Nouna was becoming rather weary of looking into the pretty shop windows without being able to buy anything, and of walking among the people in the park

without joining in any other of their amusements. George had had designed for her a tailor-made walking-dress of white cloth embroidered in gold thread and bright-coloured silks which, with a small white cloth cap embroidered in the same way, caused her appearance to make a great sensation among the conventionally ill-dressed crowds of English-women with more money, rank, and beauty, than taste. He was himself much surprised to see how easily she wore a dress of a cut to which she was unaccustomed, and how well she looked in it. The conventional shape of the gown only emphasised the difference between the natural movements of her lithe form and the stiff bobbings and jerkings and swayings which mark the gait of the ordinary English girl. The reason was simply that Nouna had by nature that great gift of beauty of attitude and movement which we call grace; and as among the handsomest women of England only one in every hundred is graceful either by nature or art, that quality alone would have been enough to make the half Indian girl conspicuous. Therefore there was much discussion among onlookers as to her nationality. The Indian type is not common enough among us to be widely recognised, or the delicate little aquiline nose, the long eyes, and the peculiar tint of her skin, might have betrayed her; as it was, conjectures wavered between France and Spain as a birthplace for her; for while she wore her dress like a Parisian, she certainly walked like a Spaniard. By no means unconscious of the attention she excited, Nouna would have liked to come in closer contact with some of the handsome Englishmen who seemed by their respectfully admiring looks to be so well-disposed towards her. For she was decidedly of a "coming-on" disposition, and not at all troubled with raw shyness or an excess of haughty reserve. Neither was she conscious of anything forward or improper in her sociability.

"All these gentlemen that we pass, and those standing in a crowd near the railings under those trees—they are gentlemen, the English gentlemen mamma thinks so much of, aren't they?"

"Oh yes," answered George smiling, "they are among what are called the best men, though it's rather a rum term to apply to some of them."

"I should like to know some of them: you do, I see them nod to you."

"Wouldn't you rather know some of the pretty ladies?"

"No," answered Nouna promptly. "Their dresses always drag on the ground one side, and they wear dreadful flat boots like Martha the servant. I like the gentlemen better."

"But you mustn't judge people only by their dress, Nouna," said the young husband, feeling rather uncomfortable.

"I can't judge them by anything else till I know them," said Nouna fretfully.

George was silent. He was disappointed to learn that she was so soon weary of the perpetual *tête-à-tête* which had lost no charm for him; but he had the sense to own that his ambitions, even the daily meeting with his comrades at parade, made his life fuller than his young wife's could possibly be. He resolved to call upon the Millards, who, anxious not to intrude upon the newly-married couple before they were wanted, had refrained from calling upon the bride until they should hear again from George. On the morning of the day he had fixed for his call, a note came for him from Captain Pascoe, asking him to join a party up the river in a couple of days. Nouna read the note over his shoulder.

"Shall you go, George?" she asked with interest.

"No, dear, how can I? I've got a little wife to look after now."

"But if you were to write and say no, you couldn't come because you'd got a wife, perhaps he'd ask me too!"

George had no doubt of this, believing indeed that this was the result Captain Pascoe had aimed at.

"Captain Pascoe is not quite the sort of man I should like you to know, dear," he said.

"Isn't he an English gentleman?"

"Oh yes, but English gentlemen aren't all angels, you know."

"And aren't you ever going to let me know anybody who isn't an angel?"

"Well, darling, I don't think anybody else is good enough."

A pause. George hoped she was satisfied for the present. She was still behind his chair, so that he could not see her face. At last she asked, in a low, rather menacing tone:

"Are angels' wings made of feathers, like birds'?"

"I don't know, dear, I suppose so," said George laughing, and turning to look at her and pat her cheek.

"Then if I met one I should pull them out," she cried in a flame of fury, and before her husband could recover from his astonishment, she had fled out of the room.

He followed her with a troubled countenance, and found her face downwards on the bed, sobbing her heart out. No remonstrances were of any use, she only murmured that she would like to be a nun, it was more interesting than to be a wife shut up and never allowed to speak to anybody.

"But, Nouna, the Indian ladies are much more shut up than you are."

"They have beautiful wide palaces to live in. I shouldn't care if I had a palace."

"Well, you know I can't give you a palace, but if you will be good and leave off crying, I will take you on the river myself one day."

"Will you? When, when?" cried she, starting up excited, all her griefs forgotten.

"I'll see if I can take you to-morrow."

She flung her arms round his neck, not to ask his pardon for her petulance, but to assure him that he was the best, kindest husband that ever lived, and that no Indian Maharanee in all her splendour of marble courts and waving palms was ever so happy as she.

George kept his promise, and on the following day took her down to Kingston, and rowed her up as far as Shepperton and back. She was delighted with the river, and, charmed with the idea of being a person of responsibility, showed great aptitude for a beginner at steering. Being one of those quick-eyed, neat-handed persons whose wit is rather nimble than profound, she acquired accomplishments of this nature with a feminine and graceful ease; and sitting with the ropes over her shoulders, her dark eyes intent with care gleaming from beneath her white baby-bonnet, she made a picture so perfect that, as usual, every man who passed looked at her with undisguised admiration, and glanced from her to her companion to find out more about her through him. All this George, who was not too much lost in his own adoration to note the casual votive glances offered to his idol, bore with complacency, until, just as they entered Sunbury Lock, on the return journey, a well-known voice

calling his name from a boat that was already waiting inside the gates, startled him. He turned and saw a crew of four men, two of whom were Captain Pascoe and Clarence Massey. The impetuous little Irishman dragged the two boats alongside each other, and instantly plunged into conversation with Nouna, who seemed delighted with the incident. George was not a Bluebeard ; still, remembering all the circumstances of Nouna's previous acquaintance with the all round lover, Massey, he by no means desired the friendship to grow closer between them, and he was not pleased by the glances of interest which Nouna exchanged with Captain Pascoe, who had an air of quiet good-breeding particularly attractive to women. The two boats passed each other again and again on the way to Kingston, for the stronger crew seemed to be in no great hurry, and were not perhaps unwilling to be occasionally passed by a boat steered by such an interesting little coxswain. At any rate the smaller craft arrived first at Bond's, and George took his wife up stairs to the coffee-room for a cup of tea. Then she discovered that she felt rather "faint," and had forgotten her smelling-salts ; would George go out and get her some ? What could a newly-fledged husband do but comply, however strong his objection might be to leaving his wife alone in a public room ? There was no one in it, however, but a cheerful and kind little waitress, who seemed quite overcome by the young lady's beauty ; so he gave Nouna a hurried kiss when the girl's back was turned, and hastened off to fulfil her behest as fast as possible.

He found a chemist's very quickly, and returned with the smelling-salts in a few moments. But Nouna had entirely recovered from her faintness, and instead of finding her reclining on the horse-hair sofa with closed eyes and a face of romantic paleness, George discovered her enthroned in an arm-chair, all vivacity and animation, holding a small but adoring court composed of the crew that had dogged their progress on the river. Massey was talking the most ; but Captain Pascoe, by virtue of his superiority in years and position as well as a certain distinction of appearance and manner, was undoubtedly the most prominent and the most favoured courtier. For a moment George stopped in the doorway, as a terrible remembrance of the tale of the genie who locked the lady up in a glass case flashed into his mind. He dismissed the ugly fancy immediately ; what reason had

he for supposing Nouna had any unconfessed motive in sending him away? There was nothing now but to make the best of it, to join the party, and even to hear Captain Pascoe repeat the invitation up the river as Nouna had hoped, and reluctantly to add his own acceptance of it to his wife's.

The train in which the husband and wife returned to town was not crowded, and they had a compartment to themselves. The excitement of entertaining being over, Nouna took off her bonnet and leaned back in a corner with her eyes closed, tired out.

"Where are your salts, dear?" asked George, putting his hand tenderly on her wavy hair.

She opened her eyes languidly.

"Salts! Oh, I don't know. I never use them!"

George was knocked over by this appalling confession.

"Never use them! Then you did not want them when you sent me out for them?" he said, almost stammering.

She half-raised her heavy eyelids again with a malicious little smile, and patted his hand re-assuringly, with some pride in her own ingenuity, and quite as much in his.

"Clever boy!" she whispered languidly. "You see I wanted to go up the river again, and I knew you wouldn't introduce him so that he could invite me."

And clasping her little hands, which she had relieved of her gloves, with a beatific smile of perfect satisfaction, she curled her head into her left shoulder like a bird and prepared to doze.

"How did you know it was Captain Pascoe?" asked George in a hard, dry voice.

"Heard the little red man call him so," murmured Nouna sleepily.

George drew back, shocked, wounded, and perplexed. To correct her for petty deceits was like demonstrating to a baby the iniquity of swallowing its toys; she could not understand how it was wrong to obtain by any means in her power anything she wanted. There was no great harm done after all, when the deed was followed by such quick and innocent confession. But none the less, the habit showed a moral obliquity which could not fail to be a distressing sign that the ennobling influences of matrimony, literature, the arts and religion had not yet had any great and enduring effect. He withdrew into the corner furthest from her, bewildering himself with conjectures as to what the right way

to treat her might really be, not at all willing as yet to own that the wives who fascinate men most are not the docile creatures who like clay can be moulded to any shape their lord and master may please to give them, but retain much of the resistance of marble, which requires a far higher degree of skill and patience in the working, and had best be left alone altogether except by fully qualified artists of much experience in that medium. Even in the midst of his disturbed musings a consolation, if not a light, came to him. He heard Nouna move. He was staring out at the darkening landscape through one of the side-windows, and did not look round : before he knew she was near him she had climbed into his lap.

"Put your arms round me ; I want to go to sleep," cooed she.

And, alas, for philosophy and high morality ! at the touch of her arms all his fears and his misgivings melted into passionate, throbbing tenderness, and he drew the head of the perhaps not wholly undesigning Nouna down on to his shoulder with the sudden feeling that his doubts of her entire perfection had burst like bubbles in the air.

Nevertheless, it became clear again that evening that young Mrs. Lauriston contemplated a revolution in the tenor of her quiet life.

"I wonder," she said pensively at supper, resting from the labour of eating grapes, with a face of concentrated earnestness, "that mamma has taken no notice of the letter I sent her the very day after I was married. I told her of a very particular wish I had, and you know mamma always has let me have every wish I have ever made ; I can't understand it."

"What wish was that ?" asked George, feeling it useless to complain of the want of confidence which had prevented her from communicating it before.

"I want to have a large house that I can furnish as I please, and where I can receive my friends," said Nouna with rather a haughty, regal air.

George began to see that it was of no use to oppose the sociable bent of her mind, and he occupied himself therefore in wondering whether this wish of Nouna's, expressed in a letter which passed through the lawyers' hands before his last visit to them, had had any relation to their unexpected announcement of a possible accession of his wife to fortune.

A few days later the conjecture acquired still more force through a letter from Mr. Angelo, informing him that the will case of which he had spoken had been decided out of court, and that Mrs. Lauriston was entitled to an income of four thousand a year, and a house in Queen's Gate which she could let or occupy at her discretion. The property was, by the late Captain Weston's bequest, to be hers on her majority or on her marriage, whichever event should take place first; therefore if Mr. and Mrs. Lauriston would call at their office at an early date, Messrs. Smith and Angelo would put them in possession of all further details, and be able to complete certain necessary formalities. These formalities, however, turned out to be very few and very simple, and George was surprised at the ease with which such a young woman as Nouna could enter into possession of so considerable an income. As for her, she was crazy with delight, and on learning that she could have an advance to furnish her house and make in it what alterations she liked, she awoke into a new life of joyful activity which seemed almost to suggest some superhuman agency in enabling her to be in half a dozen places at once.

When at last, after having shown in the arrangement of her handsome home some of the skill of an artist, and herself superintended the work of the most intelligent artisans a distinguished firm in Bond Street could furnish, Nouna introduced her husband in triumph to the little palace on the south of the park, poor George was overwhelmed by a crowd of bitter and sorrowful feelings to which Nouna's half-childish, half-queenly delight in the change from the home of his creating to the home of hers gave scarcely anything more than an added pang. What could he hope to be to her now but a modest consort half ignored amidst the pretty state with which she evidently meant to surround herself? What sense of authority over her, of liberty for himself, could he hope to have, when, instead of her sharing his prospects, he was simply sharing hers? Since she could so lightly part, with no sensation stronger than relief, from those associations with their first days of wedded love which he held so dear, what hold could he really have on her heart at all? And suddenly, in the midst of his grave reflections, Nouna herself, to-day clothed in a whirlwind, shattering or fluttering every object and every creature she came near, would fly at him down some corridor,

or through some curtain, like an incarnate spirit of joyous triumph, and force him, with or without his will, to rejoice with her in her work. But with a laugh, and a rush of light words and a tempestuous caress, she would leave him again, it being out of the question that a man's sober feet could carry him from attic to cellar with as much swiftness as she felt the occasion required of her, the new mistress. So George made his tour of inspection for the most part by himself, civilly declining the offer of the housekeeper as a guide. This he felt as a new grievance, this staff of servants, whom he and even Nouna had had no hand in choosing, Mr. Angelo, with his customary strange officiousness, having undertaken that and many other details of the new household. On this point, however, George could console himself; as soon as he and his wife were installed, he should make a bold demonstration of the fact that, however weak he might be in the dainty little hands of his wife, he was not to be ruled by anybody else, and intended, with that one important exception perhaps, to be master in his own house.

Even while he made these reflections, he was the unseen witness to a little scene which, in his irritable frame of mind, filled him with anger and suspicions. He was standing on the ground floor, at a bend in the hall, screened from view by a mass of the tall tropical plants with which it was a canon of taste with Nouna to fill every available nook, when his attention was attracted by a peculiar soft treble knock on the panels of the door of an apartment which he had not seen, but which he had been told was the housekeeper's room. Looking through the great leaves, which he separated with his hand, he saw Mrs. Benfield, the housekeeper, standing at the door. The next moment a key was turned and the door opened from inside, another woman let her in, and immediately the door was re-locked. George, already not in the best of humours, would not stand these mysteries in a place which, as long as he chose to live in it, he was determined should be his own house. He crossed the hall, and knocked sharply on the panels.

"Who is it?" asked Mrs. Benfield's voice.

"It is I, your master."

There was a pause of a few seconds, and George could hear the rustling of women's gowns. Then the door was unlocked and thrown wide with much appearance of deferential haste by Mrs. Benfield.

"I am sorry to have kept you so long, sir ; but the locks are new and a little stiff just at first, and I——"

George did not hear the rest of her explanation. He was looking at the woman whom the housekeeper introduced as a friend of hers, avowing that she had been afraid it would be considered a liberty to have a visitor so soon ; but she was so anxious to have a sight of the young master and mistress that——

George interrupted. "Of my wife ? Pray come with me then, she will be quite pleased to find herself an object of so much interest."

He spoke courteously and with suppressed excitement, making a step forward to where Mrs. Benfield's visitor sat close against the window and with her back to the light. For he had a strong suspicion of the identity of this stranger, who shrank into herself at the suggestion, and said she thanked Mr. Lauriston, she would rather not be seen ; she felt rather uncomfortable at having come.

"You need not, indeed," said George in a vibrating voice, gazing intently at the black silhouette, of which he could make out exasperatingly little but the shape of a close bonnet. "I am sure my wife will have particular pleasure in seeing you. I beg you to let me fetch her."

The lady—there was no mistaking a certain refinement in the voice, even in that hurried whisper—was evidently agitated ; but she said nothing as Lauriston retreated towards the door. He crossed the hall to call his wife, scarcely leaving the door of the housekeeper's room out of sight as he did so. But in that moment when his eyes were not upon it, the mysterious stranger found means to escape ; for when Nouna flew down and rushed into the small apartment at her husband's bidding, there was no one for her to see but Mrs. Benfield, who, much perturbed and grey about the face, explained that her friend, being a nervous woman, had not dared to face the ordeal of a personal introduction to the young lady.

George said nothing, and let his wife wander away again without further explanation, thinking that after all the one small bit of knowledge he had gained he had better at present keep to himself.

He knew by the unmistakable evidence of the voice that he had just seen and spoken with Nouna's mother.

CHAPTER XVII.

GEORGE LAURISTON was not allowed to make much of his small discovery that Nouna's mother was not so far off as she wished it to be believed. The very morning after his meeting with the strange lady in the housekeeper's room he received a private communication to the effect that Madame di Valdestillas had run over to England from Paris on purpose to see in the flesh the man upon whom her daughter's happiness depended ; she had not dared to show herself to Nouna lest her darling should be overwhelmed at the shortness of her visit, and ply her with prayers which it would be impossible to resist and cruel to her invalid husband to grant. She had seen, so she declared, generosity and all noble qualities imprinted in her son-in-law's face, and she begged him to open his heart to receive her as his mother as well as Nouna's, when, at two or three months' time at farthest, she would induce her husband to settle permanently in England, so that she might be near her children.

"You must have seen, my dear Mr. Lauriston," she went on, "that at sight of you I was almost too much overcome to speak. Think what it is to be face to face. for the first time, with the person to whose care you have blindly confided the being you love best in the world, to be for the first time in seven years under the same roof with the creature for whose sake alone the world seems bright to you, and the chill air of this earth worth the breathing. I lead a brilliant life as the wife of a rich man, a man of rank ; but it is empty and dreary to me without the child whom for her own sake I may not now see. Be kind to her, cherish her, be to her the tender guardian my other ties prevented

me from being, for what I have entrusted to your care is the idol of my prayers.

“Ever your affectionate mother,

“LAKSHMI DI VALDESTILLAS.

“P.S.—Any money you may require for setting up your establishment in a manner befitting the position in the world I wish my son and daughter to take I will willingly advance at once through Messrs. Smith and Angelo. An officer of such a regiment as yours wants no passport to the best set in London; but if you propose to come to France, or Spain, or Germany, during the autumn, let me know, and I will take care to furnish you with the very best introductions.”

This communication was the same curious combination as before of passionate letter and prosaic postscript, and again the rather flowery language and gleams of practical sense reminded him of Nouna. The romantic, hybrid signature, Lakshmi di Valdestillas, had an undoubtedly strong effect in explaining the eccentricity of the writer, who, with her Eastern descent and Spanish surroundings, could not fairly be judged by rules which govern the ordinary Englishwoman.

The Countess did not fail to impress the purport of her postscript on her daughter's mind also, and Nouna was not slow to profit by the injunction. She loved luxury and splendour, had a strong sense of the picturesque, and would have surrounded herself, if that had been possible, with the half-barbarous state of an Oriental potentate. That being out of the question, she snatched readily at the best substitute that offered itself, and found her husband's fellow-officers, who made no delay in calling upon her, more interesting, if less picturesque, than the turbaned slaves with whom she would have filled her fancifully-decorated apartments.

George was much astonished by the unexacting rapidity with which his wife was “taken up” by people to whom her mother's foreign title meant nothing. For those officers who were married brought their wives, and no vagary either in Nouna's dress or manner, no peculiarity in the arrangement of her rooms prevented them from making “a lion” of the fascinating little Indian, from imploring her to come

to their receptions, enshrining her photograph—in an impromptu costume rigged up hastily with pins, out of a tablecloth and two antimacassars, and universally pronounced “so deliciously Oriental”—on their cabinets, and begging her scrawling signature for their birthday-books. It was not until some days after the stream of calls and invitations had begun to pour in upon the delighted Nouna that it occurred to George to remember that the pioneer of this invasion was Lord Florencecourt’s sister, the Countess of Crediton, a lady who combined her brother’s hardness of feature with a corresponding rigidity of mind which made her a pillar of strength to all the uncompromising virtues. When he did recall this circumstance, George felt more surprise than ever. No one but the Colonel himself, who had an enormous influence over his sister, could have induced her to take this step ; and yet his attitude towards Nouna, on that awkward introduction which he had made no attempt to follow up by a call, had apparently been one of dislike but faintly tempered with the scantest possible courtesy. Why, his very endeavour to get Lauriston to exchange and put the Irish Channel between himself and his old friend was clearly born of the wish to get rid, not of the promising young lieutenant, but of the dark-complexioned wife !

An incident which happened when the Colonel did at last make his tardy call only increased the mystery of his conduct.

It was a hot August afternoon. The wide, tiled hall had in the centre a marble basin holding a pyramid of great blocks of ice, which melted and dripped slowly ; large-leaved tropical plants filled all the corners ; the walls, which were stencilled in Indian designs, were hung with huge engraved brass trays, and trophies of Asiatic armour. A low, broad seat covered with thin printed cotton stuff, so harmoniously coloured as to suggest some dainty and rare fabric, ran the length of one side. An Indian carpet covered the staircase, the side of which was draped with the richest tapestry. The simplicity, beauty, and coolness of the whole effect was unusual and pleasing to most unimaginative British eyes, but George, who came out into the hall on hearing the Colonel’s voice, saw him glance round at plants and trophies with an expression of shuddering disgust.

“ You don’t admire my wife’s freaks of decoration, I see,

Lord Florencecourt," said George, smiling. Then, a new idea crossing his mind, he asked quickly: "Have you been to India?"

Lord Florencecourt shot a rapid, piercing look at him.

"Yes, it's a d—d hole," he answered briefly.

This was so summary and to the point, that Lauriston's questions, if not his interest, were checked, and he led the way up stairs without pursuing the subject.

If the eccentricity of the hall were not to the Colonel's taste, it was easy to predict that the drawing-rooms would have no charms for him. Here Nouna had let her own conceptions of comfort run riot. No modern spindle-legged furniture, no bric-a-brac. The floor of both rooms was covered with matting, strewn with the well-mounted skins of wild beasts. There the resemblance between the two apartments ended. For the walls of the first were painted black and lined from floor to ceiling with queer little shelves, and brackets, and cupboards, like a Japanese cabinet. The shelves and brackets were filled with vases of cut flowers, cups and saucers of egg-shell china, dainty baskets filled with fruit, brass candlesticks, bright blue plates, cut glass bottles of perfume, hand mirrors from the Palais Royal with frames of porcelain flowers, screens, fans, a hundred dainty and beautiful trifles, each one of which, however, had its use and was not "only for show." The panels of some of the numerous and oddly-shaped cupboards were inlaid with Japanese work in ivory, pearl, and gold, while others were hung with bright-coloured curtains of Indian silk, fastened back with gold tassels. The ceiling was entirely covered with gold-coloured silk, drawn together in folds in the centre, where the ends were gathered into a huge rosette, tied round with a thick gold cord, finished by tassels which hung downwards a couple of feet. Under this was a large low ottoman, covered with tapestry squares that seemed to have been stitched on carelessly according to the fancy of the worker. From the middle of the seat rose a small pedestal supporting an Indian female figure in coloured bronze, who held high in her hands two tinted lamps, which gave the only light used in the room. The curtains to the windows and doors were gold-coloured silk, edged with gold fringe. Little Turkish tables inlaid with pearl, and immense cushions thrown about the floor in twos and threes, formed all the rest of the furniture.

The second room was as full of flowers and plants as a conservatory. Between the groups of foliage and blossom were low black wicker seats, with crimson and gold cushions, and in one corner, hidden by azaleas and large ferns, was a grand piano, which, whenever Nouna was at home, a young girl, a professional pianist, was engaged to play. The walls of this room were bright with unframed sheets of looking-glass, divided only by long curtains of gold-coloured silk, which reflected both plants and flowers in never-ending vistas of foliage and bloom. The ceiling of this room was painted like a pale summer-sky with little clouds, and the only lighting was by tiny globes of electric light suspended from it.

When George entered the first of these rooms, ushering in the Colonel, Nouna was as usual lying indolently on a pile of cushions, an attitude which she varied for few of her visitors, certainly not for this old gentleman whom she did not like. She held up to him a condescending hand, however, which he did not detain long in his. The whole atmosphere of the place was evidently disagreeable to him ; every object on which his glance rested, from Nouna's fantastic white costume with red velvet girdle, cap, and slippers, to the tigers on the floor, whose glassy eyes and gleaming fangs reminded him of many a fierce jungle-encounter, seemed to excite in him a new disgust, until Nouna, to make a diversion in a conversation which her antipathy and the vagueness of his answers rendered irksome to her, told her husband to show Lord Florencecourt her new palms, and lazily touching a little bell on a table by her side, fell back quietly on her cushions as a gentle intimation that she was not going to throw away her efforts at entertainment any more. The two gentlemen walked obediently into the adjoining room, which was divided from the first only by gold-coloured silk curtains which were never closed.

As they did so, the outer door of the first room was softly opened, and the swarthy white robed Sundran, walking with noiseless flat-footed tread, crossed the room and laid a little brass tray with porcelain cups and teapot down by her mistress's side.

The Colonel, who was speaking to George, stopped suddenly, as if the thought that moved his words had been suddenly frozen in his brain, while his furrowed face turned

at once to that dead greenish grey which, on sallow faces, is the ghastly sign of some strong and horrible emotion. Following the direction of his eyes with a swift glance, George saw that it was the Indian woman who had excited this feeling, and that this time the Colonel's disgust was more than a reminder—it was a recognition. Lauriston's first impulse was to call to Sundran, to make her turn, to confront the one with the other, and tear down at one rough blow the mystery which was beginning to wind itself about one side of his life. But the expression on his old friend's face was too horrible; it was an agony, a terror; for the Colonel's sake George dared not interfere. Lord Florencecourt, after the first moment, recovered enough self-possession to make a step further back among the plants, as if to admire one of them. But it was plain to his companion that he was merely seeking a stand-point from which he could observe the woman without being seen by her. And as George watched his face under cover of idle remarks about the flowers, he saw that further scrutiny was bringing about in the Colonel's mind not relief, but certainty.

As soon as Sundran had withdrawn, Lord Florencecourt advanced to take his leave: but as he did so the door opened, and Lady Millard, accompanied by two of her daughters, was ushered in, and he was detained with or without his will by pretty chattering Charlotte. It was not their first visit; but they were so charmed with the picturesque little bride that they could not keep long away from her, Ella in particular finding a fascination in George's wife, which was perhaps less extraordinary than the interest Nouna took in the plain abrupt-mannered girl. To Lord Florencecourt, who, in spite of his forced semi-civility, succeeded very ill in masking his intense dislike to young Mrs. Lauriston, the fuss his nieces made with the girl was nothing short of disgusting. Thus when he said, noticing an unmistakable fragrance prevailing over the perfumes of sandalwood and attar of roses:

"I observe that you let your husband smoke, Mrs. Lauriston."

Nouna waved her hand towards a little engraved gold cigarette case, beside which a tiny lamp was burning, and answered with a bubbling laugh:

"How can I stop him when I set the example?"

The ladies were enraptured; they begged her to smoke

to show them how she did it, and Nouna, with a sly, mock-frightened glance from under her eyelashes at Lord Florencecourt, whose expression of rigid disapproval did not escape her, said, addressing him in the half-aggrieved, half-deferential air of the man invaded by an elderly female in a smoking-carriage :

“ I hope you don't object to smoking, sir ! ”

He did : every line of his face said so. But he could do nothing but smile galvanically, assure her he thought it charming, and hand her the cigarette-case with all the easy grace with which a man travelling first-class produces a third-class ticket.

“ You will have to lock up Henry's cigars from Charlotte and Cicely before long, Effie,” said he to his sister-in-law in a dry aside.

“ Oh, I don't think so, Horace,” she replied easily.

Being the daughter of an American millionaire who had gathered together a priceless collection of paintings and then placed them in a gallery with a magnificent roof of elaborately coloured glass, she was used to eccentricity, and to allowing a wide latitude to individual taste. She had not time to say more, for at that moment Nouna herself crossed the room to her, and joined hands before her in a humbly suppliant attitude.

“ If you please, Lady Millard, I want to ask a great favour. It's such a very great favour that George says I ought not to dream of asking it of any one I haven't known much longer than I have known you. Now—may I ask it ? ”

“ With the reservation that if it's anything penal I may refuse.”

“ Certainly. Well, Lady Millard, I want you to help me to cure a poor man who is suffering for want of change of air.”

“ Why, of course I will, with pleasure—”

“ Oh, but do you understand ? I want you to invite him down to Norfolk—and while I'm there ! ”

Every one began to laugh except Lord Florencecourt, and the suppliant turned to glance round gravely at the mockers.

“ Ah, but I'm not in fun,” she continued undeterred. “ I am interested in this poor fellow—” Again Ella was obliged to give vent to an irrepressible little titter. “ And I know

that he ought to go out of town, and he won't unless he gets an invitation where he feels sure that he will enjoy himself." Unmindful of renewed signs of amusement, she ended: "His own people are clergymen and great-aunts and other things like that, so of course he will not go to them."

Lady Millard drew her down on to the ottoman beside her, repressing her own inclination to laugh.

"And what is the name of the interesting young invalid?"

"Dicky Wood."

"Dicky Wood!" and the three ladies echoed it in much astonishment. "Why, he is quite well!" "We saw him only the other day!" they cried.

Nouna nodded sagaciously.

"Of course," she said, glancing round with a patronising sweep of the eyes at the two younger ladies, both of whom were considerably older than she, "your daughters cannot know so well as I do; I am a married woman, the boys come and talk to me; but I know that he is not well at all, and if he does not go away soon he will go into a decline, I believe." She ended with such tragic solemnity that all the girls' inclination to laugh at her ingenuousness died suddenly away.

Lady Millard took off Nouna's cap, smoothed her hair, and kissed her as if she had been one of her own daughters. She felt a strong sympathy for this little creature who dared to be impulsive and unconventional and natural in a country which to her had been full of iron bonds of strait-laced custom.

"I will see if it can be managed, dear," she said kindly. "Of course I can't promise till I've seen Sir Henry."

Lord Florencecourt's harsh voice rasped their ears just as the younger lady was heartily returning the kiss of the elder.

"And pray what does Mrs. Lauriston's husband say?"

Nouna's head sprang back with great spirit.

"Mrs. Lauriston's husband has only to say yes to whatever Mrs. Lauriston wishes, or he would be no husband for me," she said decidedly.

At this neither George nor any one else could help laughing.

"Oh, Nouna, you don't know what a reputation you're giving us both!" he said, as soon as he could command his voice. "They'll say I'm henpecked."

She looked for a moment rather dismayed, as if not quite measuring the force of the accusation. Then with a sudden turn towards him, her whole face aglow with affection, she said in a low, impulsive voice :

"Does it matter what they say as long as we're both so happy?"

"No, child, it doesn't!" cried Lady Millard, carried away by the young wife's frank simplicity.

But on Lord Florencecourt's prejudiced mind the little scene was only another display of the most brazen coquetry. He and the ladies left together, and they were not out of the house before George, in a transport of passion, snatched into his arms the wife who was always discovering new charms for him. Presently she said :

"George, that wooden-faced Lord Florencecourt hates me!"

"When you've seen Lady Florencecourt, you'll understand that a taste for the one type of woman is incompatible with a taste for the other."

"But why then did he make his sister call upon me? For she said it was her brother made her call, and everybody thinks a visit from Lady Crediton a great thing!"

"Well, I suppose it must have been to please me, Nouna," said her husband.

But in truth he did not feel sure of it, Lord Florencecourt's conduct lately having been in more ways than one a mystery to him.

Two days later, however, he had a conversation with his chief, the end of which supplied, as he thought, a clue to it. Lord Florencecourt began by reproaching him for a falling off in the quality of his ambition.

"I can see it," said he, "I can see the fire slackening every day, aims getting lower, if not more sordid. I am an old fool, I suppose, to begin 'the service is going to the dogs' cry; but I, for one, believe in enthusiasm; a soldier without it is not worth the cost of his uniform; and I'd sooner see a young officer's body shot down with a bullet than his soul gnawed away by a woman."

"Colonel, you are going too far—"

"No, I'm not. What will you remember of the hardest

words an old man can speak when you are once again in the arms of that—”

“You forget you are speaking of my wife,” interrupted George hastily in a low hoarse voice.

“Your wife ! How many of the duties of a wife will that little thing in the red cap perform ? Will she look after your household, bring up your children well, keep you up to your work, advance your interests by her tact, nurse you when you're laid up ? No ; she'll ruin you by her extravagance, disgrace you by her freaks, and if you ever should be ill or ordered off and unable to keep your eye on her, ten to one she'd bolt with some other man.”

“With all respect, Colonel, I think I have chosen my wife as well as some of my superiors,” said George, at a white heat, scarcely opening his lips.

Now every one knew that Lady Florencecourt was the soul of “aggravation,” but Lauriston had no idea that his retort would bowl the Colonel over so completely. Instead of indignation at the lieutenant's turning the tables upon him, his face expressed nothing but blank horror, and an agony as acute as that which he had suffered two days before at sight of the Indian woman Sundran. Again the look was momentary ; and in his usual voice, with his eyes fixed upon George, without any irritation, he said slowly :

“Lady Florencecourt—” He paused. George remained silently facing him, rather ashamed of himself. The Colonel continued more glibly—“Lady Florencecourt may be surpassed in amiability, I admit that. But she is at least above reproach, infirmity of temper in a wife counting rather on the right side of the balance, as the due of uncompromising virtue.”

“But, Colonel,” hazarded George apologetically, being moved to some compassion by these outlines of a gloomy domestic picture, “you would not expect my wife to be yet as uncompromising as Lady Florencecourt ?”

“Isn't it going rather far when she cannot pass a week's visit to a country-house without providing herself with a retinue of young men ?”

“Oh, Dicky Wood !” said George cheerfully. “That's all right ; it is the purest good-nature her wanting to get poor Wood out of town now. He's got into—”

He stopped. Lord Florencecourt was his friend, but he was also his commanding officer, and Dicky's. He hesitated,

grew red, and muttered something about retrenchment and pulling up. But he had said too much, and under promise of his communication being treated confidentially, he had to finish it.

"I'm as sorry about it as I can be, and so's my wife ; for we both like Wood, as everybody does. But some wretched woman has got hold of him—you know, sir, he is well off, and as generous as sun in the tropics, and so we want to get him away, if we can persuade him to go. And he hasn't had any leave for ever so long."

The Colonel listened gravely, and when the account was over he spoke in a rather less hard tone.

"H'm, if the young fool has once begun on that tack, you may as well let him be squeezed dry by one as by another," he said grimly. "And a young gentleman fond of that kind of society will be a nice sort of companion for your wife." His tone still implied also that the wife would be "a nice sort of companion for him."

"But, sir, Wood isn't like an ordinary fellow ; he's such a gentle, open-hearted creature, it quite knocks one over to see him made a meal of—and by a woman like Chloris White !"

Lauriston's first impression, on noting the sudden contraction of his hearer's face into greater rigidity than ever, at this contemptuous mention by name of one of the most notorious persons in London, was that he had "put his foot in it." The Colonel's austerity might not be so thorough-going as he had imagined. The next moment he was undeceived as Lord Florencecourt's eyes moved slowly round, as if by an effort, till they rested on his face.

"God help the lad ! Do your best for him, Lauriston, if you will ; pulling a man out of the hug of a boa-constrictor's d——d easy work compared to it !"

Lord Florencecourt shivered, and looked at the windows as he got up and walked away, so little himself that he began trying to smoke a cigar he had not lighted.

It was then that by an inspiration an explanation of his late extraordinary conduct occurred to Lauriston.

"Wonder if he's going off his head !" he thought with sorrowful concern. "And it's taking the form of antipathy to women. First Nouna ; then Sundran ; last of all this Chloris White ! Poor old chap ! Poor dear old chap !"

that comes of marrying Lady Florencecourt; or perhaps his marriage was the first sign of it."

And George, trying in vain to account in any other way for the strange behaviour of his friend, went home to renewed raptures over his own happier choice.

CHAPTER XVIII.

GEORGE LAURISTON'S gloomy forebodings at the entire change in their manner of life brought about by Nouna's becoming a comparatively rich woman, were not, in the first few weeks at least, fulfilled. The new way of living pleased the volatile child-woman much better than the old ; and as she was never happy or miserable by halves, her joy in her good fortune was so strong as to be infectious ; it was impossible to live in the neighbourhood of her full sensuous delight in existence without catching some of its radiance ; and George, while ashamed of the weakness which made him take the colour of his life from hers, when he had meant in the most orthodox way to make her tastes and feelings accord with his own, found a fierce and ever-strengthening pleasure in the intoxicating love-draughts his passion afforded him, until his ambition, which perhaps had been none of the highest, began to sleep, and thought and principle to grow languid under the enervating influence of the question : What good in heaven or earth is worth the striving for, when this, the most absorbing soul or sense can imagine, is close to my hand, at my lips ? And so, as in all encounters of the affections, the greater love was at the mercy of the less ; and George, telling himself that time and experience would develop in her all those other qualities which his own efforts had failed to draw out, but which, being part of his conception of the ideal woman, must lie dormant somewhere in the queen of his heart, gave himself up to adoration of those excellences in her which had been already demonstrated ; and they lived through those hot summer weeks in happiness, which caused the one first awake in the morning to touch the other softly, doubtingly,

to make sure that their life of dream-like joy was a reality still.

George had had, of course, to indulge the cravings of Nouna's sociability, and to submit to the entertaining of visitors, and to the establishment of an institution which in its beginnings rather shocked him. Nouna, finding that the social day began late, readily understood that this necessitated "stealing a few hours from the night," and she accordingly encouraged such of her husband's friends as met with her approval, to "come and smoke a cigar with George after dinner." As this invitation was invariably accepted, and as the entertainment always included a perfectly served little supper, under the famous golden silk ceiling. Mrs. Lauriston's "midnight parties" soon began to be talked about, and to afford a nice little scandal to be worried by all the women who were jealous of the little lady's rapid and surprising success. Even when with August the dead season sets in, there are always men detained in town by business or caprice, and Nouna found no falling off in attendance at these receptions, so consonant with masculine tastes and habits, and there was a general outcry of aggrieved bachelordom—bachelordom in its wide sense, including those who had attained a more complete form of existence, but still wallowed in the unworthy habits of the less honourable state—when the time came for Mr. and Mrs. Lauriston to start for Norfolk.

Lord Florencecourt, who was already at Willingham, had asked George, with an assumed carelessness which the latter was too well-informed to misinterpret, whether they intended to take "that hideous black woman," whose ugliness, he declared, had nearly made the rest of his hair turn white the only time he saw her, with them to Norfolk. George said no, but he was not sorry when, later, Nouna insisted upon Sundran's accompanying them, as he had a lurking wish to see what the effect would be if the woman were to confront the Colonel. Nouna had scoffed at the notion of his being insane, and on learning that his marriage might possibly have had an effect on his mind, she expressed great curiosity to see this formidable wife.

George laughed rather mischievously.

"I'm afraid you'll have to forego that pleasure, Nouna," he said, shaking his head. "I heard from Ella Millard the other day that Lady Florencecourt is so much shocked by what she has heard about you and your wicked heathen

ways, that she has quarrelled with her brother, Sir Henry, about their invitation to you, and has refused to visit them while you are at the Lodge !”

Nouna, who was playing at packing, having been busy for twenty minutes with a delicate Sèvres tea-pot and some yards of tissue paper, let the china fall from her hands at these words, in a torrent of indignation. She scarcely glanced at the broken fragments on the floor, as she burst forth with great haughtiness in the high-flown language she habitually used when her passions were roused :

“Indeed ! Does then the wife of this miserable little wooden soldier think the granddaughter of a Maharajah unworthy to bear the light of her eyes ? We will see, we will see. Perhaps she is a little too imperious ; there may be powers in the earth greater than hers ! I will write to my mother, who has never yet failed to fulfil my wishes, and I will tell her to search if she can find means to humble this proud lady of the fens, so that she may sue to me to receive me in her house, heathen, foreigner, though I am !”

And with a superb gesture Nouna signified her contempt for the ironical laughter her husband could not restrain.

“Oh, little empress,” he said, good-humouredly, “you will have to learn that all magicians have limits, and that even a mother so devoted as yours can’t carry out all the freaks that enter into one little feminine head. The very king of the black art could not move Lady Florencecourt !”

“The king ! Perhaps not, because he is a foolish male thing,” retorted Nouna coldly, “but what my mother wills to do she does, and I trust her.”

And she would not suffer any further word on the subject.

George was in the depths of his heart not without a little anxiety about this Norfolk visit. Unconventionality is so much more unconventional in the country, where every trifling detail in which a man differs from his neighbours is nodded over far and wide as a sign of mental aberration, while in the case of a woman it is held to warrant even graver doubts. Nouna herself was in the highest spirits at the prospect ; delightful as life in London was, a change after five weeks of her new home was more delightful still. She had had made for the occasion a varied assortment of dainty white frocks, of the kind that charm men by their simplicity, and women by their costliness, and a white costume with fine lines of red and gold, for yachting on the broads, which

might have carried off the palm at Cowes. Nouna had the instinct of dress, a regal instinct which revelled in combinations and contrasts, in forms and folds, which everyday English women might admire or marvel at, but copied at their peril. She travelled down, the day being cool, in a Spanish cloak of mouse-grey velvet, lined with ivory silk, and fastened with clasps of smoked pearl and silver. On her head she wore a cap of the same colours. The milliner, an artist spoiled by ministering to a long course of puppets, was aghast at the order, and suggested that it would make Mrs. Lauriston look, well—er—brown. Nouna replied, with a great sweep of the eyelashes, that she *was* brown, and she should be sorry to look anything else. And indeed her beauty was seen to great advantage in this original setting, and its tints might pleasantly have suggested to the fanciful brown woods in the haze of a grey October day.

They reached Gorleth, the nearest railway-station to Maple Lodge, at half-past four. Sir Henry and his daughter Cicely were on the platform, Cicely in a short grey riding habit, looking in this practical garment a thousand times handsomer and more captivating than she had done in her most brilliant ball-dress, according to the wont of her countrywomen, who, from the royal ladies downwards, never look worse than when dressed solely with the view to charm.

Let it be acknowledged once for all: the Englishwoman, to her credit be it said, is a riding animal, a walking animal, a boating animal, a cooking animal, a creature fond of hard work and hard play, full of energy and capabilities for better things than the piano-strumming and Oxford local cramming which are now drummed into her so diligently. But her social qualities are so poor as to be scarce worth cultivation unless some better methods be discovered than those now in vogue. Her dancing is more vigorous than graceful, her conversation is inane, her deportment in full dress uneasy and deplorable, and her manner at social gatherings where no active muscular exertion is required of her, dull and constrained. Ten girls are handsome and attractive in a boat or on the tennis-ground to one who at an "at-home" or a dance is passable enough to make a man want an introduction. The metropolis has the pick of the market, if the term may be allowed, in marriageable maidens as in flowers and fruit. But all alike lose their freshest, greatest

charm when they are plucked from their natural setting of country green.

George had an inkling of this truth as he helped his tiny wife out of the railway carriage, amidst the stares of a crowd of country market-folk, who gaped as they would have done if a regulation fairy, gauze wings, wand and all, had suddenly descended down the wide chimney on to their cottage hearth. He should love and admire her whatever she did, but he wanted her to sway the sceptre of conquest over all these friends at Willingham and Maple Lodge, and his heart ached with fear lest a breath of disapproval should touch her, lest she should appear to any disadvantage under such new conditions.

She herself, happily, was tormented by no such fear. She ran up to Sir Henry, who was dressed in a vile suit of coarse mustard-coloured stuff, a common little hat on his head, and a broad smile of recovered bliss on his face, looking as no self-respecting farmer among his tenants would have dared to look, and rejoicing in his escape from town and tight clothes.

"Why, you little town-mouse," he said, laughing good-humouredly as he looked down on the tiny lady, "I don't know how you will live down here. We shall have to feed you on butterflies' wings and dew-drops; I should think a mouthful of plain roast beef would kill you."

"Oh no, it wouldn't, Sir Henry," cried Nouna, distressed and offended by these doubts cast on her accomplishments. "I eat a great deal, don't I, George?"

"Well, more than one would expect, to look at you," admitted her husband, remembering the fiasco of the wedding breakfast.

"Besides," said Nouna astutely, "everything that one eats comes from the country. The town produces nothing but soot; perhaps you think I live upon that, and that's what made me half a black woman."

The genuine black woman, Sundran, was meanwhile creating a great sensation; so that, to save her from the rustic wit, which made up in blunt obtrusiveness what it lacked in point, she was packed with her mistress inside the Millards' one-horse brougham, which, like all their surroundings in their country retreat, was almost ostentatiously modest and even shabby. George was content enough to share the coachman's seat.

"I thought the maid would sit outside; I hadn't reckoned upon your bringing a lady of so striking a complexion, George," said Sir Henry apologetically. "The old carriage is such a lumbering concern that I thought the brougham would be quicker, and there's a cart for the luggage."

George laughed. "If I had my choice I'd go on the cart," said he. "I am yet unspoiled by my promotion to matrimony."

It was a pleasant drive over the flat country, too marshy to be dry and burnt up even in summer. Sir Henry and his pretty daughter kept pace with the carriage, and flung breezy commonplaces at their guests with smiling, healthy faces that made their conversational efforts more than brilliant. Nouna peeped out like a little bird at the flat green fields and the pollard willows with an expression which seemed to say that she had quite fathomed the hidden humour of the whole thing.

"I like the country," she called to Cicely with an exhaustive nod, as if she had lived in and loved the fields for years.

And at sight of the Lodge itself she grew rapturous.

Sir Henry Millard's modest country residence was nothing more than a fair-sized one-storied white cottage, close to the road, from which it was separated only by a little garden just big enough to contain a semicircular drive, a small half-moon lawn, and two side-beds full of roses. A stone-paved verandah ran the whole length of the house, and a hammock swung between two of the supports of the green roof, in what would have been glaring publicity if there had ever been any public to speak of on the quiet road in front. It would have been rather a pretty little place if Sir Henry, to meet the requirements of his family, had not preferred enlarging it by adding at the back various hideous red brick wings and outbuildings of his own designing, to the more reasonable course of taking a larger house. The pleasure of conceiving and superintending these original "improvements" had indeed, while it lasted, been the most unalloyed joy of Sir Henry's simple life; to worry the architect, who had had to be called in at the last to put a restraining check on Sir Henry's inspirations, which threatened to dispense with the vulgar adjuncts of passages and staircases; to test the building materials, samples of which lay about

the sitting-rooms for days ; above all, to do a little amateur bricklaying during the workmen's dinner hour—were joys the mere memory of which thrilled him more than any recollection of his honeymoon.

Whatever the architectural defects of the house might be, Nouna had nothing but admiration for it. The tiny little hall ; the box-like drawing-room to the right, with high glass cupboards on each side of the fireplace containing apostle spoons, old china bowls, fragments of quartz and the like ; the bare-looking dining-room to the left, furnished as plainly as a school-room, and even the bake-house which led out from it, all enchanted her by their novelty ; while the bedroom up stairs, ten feet square, into which she was shown, put the climax to this deliciously new experience, and made her feel, as she expressed herself to her husband, "that she wished she had married a farmer."

To George's delight she ran down stairs within twenty minutes of her arrival in the simplest of white muslin frocks, with a wonderful scarlet and gold sash. But he had no time to congratulate her on her good sense in dressing so appropriately before she was off, in a huge garden-hat taken with instinctive knowledge of what was most becoming from a collection in the hall, to see the farmyard—Sir Henry's pride. They made an odd pair—the broad-shouldered, solid-looking country gentleman, in his rough suit, and the small airily-clad person who varied her progress by occasional ecstatic bounds in the air, which made the ends of her sash swirl in the breeze like the wings of some gorgeous butterfly. George and the girls, with Lady Millard, followed much more sedately. When, after due admiration of cows and horses, pigs and poultry, they all returned to the verandah, fresh objects of interest presented themselves in a pretty group of riders at that moment climbing the hill upon which the lodge stood.

"Uncle Horace !" cried the girls, as Nouna recognised in the eldest of the party Lord Florencecourt. He was accompanied by two pretty boys of about eight and ten on ponies which they already managed as if boy and pony had been one creature.

"How Horace worships those boys !" muttered Sir Henry enviously.

Charlotte had run down to open the gate, and there was much clatter of lively greeting. Lord Florencecourt, though

he seemed happier down here with his children than he had been in town, showed his old constraint with Nouna. It was therefore with great surprise not only to the young husband and wife, but to their host and his family that they learnt the object of his visit.

"You see I haven't lost much time in paying my respects, Mrs. Lauriston," he said, speaking in a lively tone, but with an ill-concealed reluctance to meet her eyes. "Those girls would like to flatter themselves that my visit is for them, but they are all wrong."

"Never mind, uncle, Regie and Bertie come to see us," cried Ella, giving a kiss to the youngest boy.

Lord Florencecourt continued: "The fact is, Mrs. Lauriston, we know that you will be so run after down here, that when you have been seen a little there will be no getting hold of you. So my wife sent me to ask you and George to stay with us from Friday to Monday the week after next. Mr. Birch, our member, will be there, and we thought as he has come to the front so much lately you might like to meet him." Nouna stole a triumphant glance at her husband, and the girls, who were near enough to hear, could not forbear little unseen eyebrow-raising of astonishment. He went on: "Lady Florencecourt will call upon you on Monday, but she thought it best to send her invitation at once to make sure of you."

"It is very kind of Lady Florencecourt; I shall like to come very much," said Nouna, who was brimming over with delight and triumph. "Only I don't think I could do much to entertain a rising member of Parliament. I can't talk politics; but perhaps he'd like to learn to make cocked hats out of newspaper, and then he can amuse himself when the other members are making dull speeches."

"I'm sure he'd like it immensely if you will teach him," said Lord Florencecourt, with cold civility, which would have damped frivolity less aerial than Nouna's.

The girls thought Lady Florencecourt must have been bewitched thus to transgress her own well-known rule of ignoring any stranger whose pedigree was not at her fingers' ends. She had, besides, gone so far as to gibe at her brother for admitting "a loose-mannered young woman of unknown and questionable antecedents"—as she styled young Mrs. Lauriston—into the society of his daughters. And now she was sending a pressing invitation by the mouth

of her husband, whose prejudice against the interloper was hardly concealed ! Decidedly Nouna had a dash of Eastern magic about her. Meanwhile the young lady herself was troubling her head very little with the problem. She was much struck with the blue eyes and curly dark hair of the younger of the two boys, and bending down to him with her little head perched on one side in the coquettish manner she used alike to man, woman, child or animal, she asked with a smile what his name was.

"Allow me to present him with proper ceremony," said Ella playfully. "Permit me to introduce you," gravely to her small cousin, "to Mrs. George Lauriston. Mrs. Lauriston," turning to the lady, "the Honourable Bertram Kilmorna !"

She had scarcely uttered the last word when Nouna shot up from her bending attitude as if at an electric shock, and fixed her great eyes, wide with bewilderment and surprise, on Lord Florencecourt, who was standing behind Ella and his son, near enough to hear these words and to see their effect.

"Kilmorna !" she repeated in a whisper, still looking full at the Colonel, whose rugged face had grown suddenly rigid and grey. Then, without further ceremony, she ran away to her husband, who was talking to Lady Millard at a little distance.

"George, George !" she said in a tumultuous whisper, her face quivering with excitement, "I don't want to go to Lady Florencecourt's ; tell him I don't want to go !"

"Why, what's this ? How has the Colonel offended you ?" asked George laughing.

"He hasn't offended me at all. Only I've changed my mind. I know I—I shouldn't like Lady Florencecourt. I'd rather not go."

But as George insisted that it was impossible to break an engagement just made, without any reason, she broke from him with an impatient push, and disappeared into the house just before Lord Florencecourt, who had abruptly discovered that he was in a hurry to be off, took his leave. Ella prevented George from fetching his wife out.

"It is only some little caprice of hers," she said persuasively, not guessing that there was any mystery in the matter, and considering the young bride's conduct as the result of some girlish freak. "I think she was offended

because uncle didn't introduce the boys to her. She will be all right if you leave her alone a few minutes."

But George was not unnaturally annoyed at his wife's rudeness, and he followed her into the little drawing-room, where he found her with her nose flattened against the window, staring at Lord Florencecourt's retreating figure. She had no explanation to give of her conduct, but persisted in begging him not to take her to Willingham. As he remained firm on this point, and continued to press her for her reasons, she grew mutinous, and at last peace was only made between them on the conditions that she would go to Willingham if he would not tease her with any more questions.

And George had to be content with this arrangement, being above all things anxious to learn the meaning of the miraculous change of front on the part of Lady Florencecourt and her husband.

CHAPTER XIX.

AT dinner at Maple Lodge on the evening of their arrival, George Lauriston and his wife met the gentle Dicky Wood, who had come down the day before, and spent the afternoon riding with the son of Sir Henry's steward. Nouna was much pleased by this compliance with her wishes, and showed her appreciation of it by flirting very prettily at dinner with the young guardsman. Later in the evening she held in the verandah a little court, and chanted them some half-wild, half-monotonous Indian songs in a tiny thread of sweet voice, with some plaintive low notes that lived in the memory. And George, who was standing with Ella some yards away from the rest of the group, felt thrilled through and through by the weird melodies, and liked to fancy that in these native songs of hers the soul-voice, that, in the tumultuous life of emotions and sensations in which she found her happiness, had small opportunity to be heard, forced up its little note and promised a richer fulness of melody by and by.

It was not by the man's choice, but the girl's, that he and Ella found themselves together. At the present time there was only one woman in Lauriston's world, and in his absorption in his wife the ungrateful fellow was incapable even of feeling his old friendly pleasure in Ella's society. Her interest in him, on the other hand, as is the way with that splendid institution for the comfort and consolation of man—plain women, had grown tenfold stronger since he had lowered himself to the usual dead level of his foolish sex, by marrying through his eyes. To Ella this downfall was quite tragic; she had thought and hoped so much for him; he had feeling, sense, ambition, was, in fact, not the mere beautifully turned out figure-head of a man who, under

various disguises of light or dark complexion, slim or heavy build, was continually saying to her the same common-places, betraying to her the same idea-less vacuity, at dinner, ball, and garden-party. Yet here he was, bound for life, and by his own choice, to a beautiful pet animal, with all the fascinating ways of a kitten, who could gambol and scratch, and bask in warmth and shiver in cold, and whom nevertheless he undoubtedly worshipped. Ella, whose mind was of an intellectual cast, and in whom the passions had as yet only developed in an ardent but hazy adoration of dead-and-gone heroes, very naturally underrated the strength of one side of a man's nature, and was cast down when the creature whose sympathetic comprehension of her highest aspirations had made her raise him to a demi-god proved to be in truth only a very man. She fancied, poor child, that he showed deterioration already; when she reminded him at dinner that she had not yet returned a book of Emerson's he had lent her, George laughed carelessly, and said he had forgotten all about it.

"Don't you remember you particularly advised me to read the articles on 'Goethe' and 'Napoleon'?" she asked rather acidly.

"Oh, yes, they're very good," said he, with a man's irritating frivolity, smiling at his wife, who was shutting one eye and holding her glass of claret up to the light, in imitation of an elderly connoisseur, for the amusement of Dicky. Then, perceiving in a pause that he had offended Ella, he hastened to say penitently: "I haven't done much reading lately; but you have, I suppose; you are always so good."

"I don't read because I am *good*, but because I like it," she answered coldly.

And George, reflecting on the oddity of Ella's trying to improve him as he had tried to improve Nouna, had taken the snub meekly as a bolt of retributive providence.

But when she got an opportunity of speech with him alone in the verandah, in a rather melancholy and remorseful frame of mind, she "had her say" after her sex's fashion.

"One mustn't expect you to be the same person that you were three months ago, George," she began, with a very humble, deprecating manner. "Otherwise I would ask you why we don't hear of your coming to the front as a

writer, as we heard then there was a probability of your doing."

George laughed with the same maddening indifference to his deterioration, and asked if he might smoke. With a cigarette between his lips, flourishing before her eyes the privilege of a man, he felt more of a man's commanding position.

"I haven't come to the front," said he, "because I haven't made any steps at all, either forward, backward, or in any direction. I've been lazy, Ella, miserably, culpably lazy, and if my great thoughts have not yet stirred the world, it is no doubt only because they have not been committed to paper."

"Oh, if you are satisfied, of course that is everything. Ambition, I see, is not the great, never pausing, never ceasing motive-power that we poor foolish women are taught to believe; it is a pretty whim, to be taken up alternately with a fit of smoking, or mountain-climbing, as we girls change about between tennis and tatting."

"Not quite, Ella," said George, doing her the justice to grow serious when he saw how deeply and unselfishly she was in earnest. "Ambition does not die for lying a short time hidden by other feelings; and surely even if it loses a little of its bitter keenness, it gains by being no longer wholly selfish."

"A beautiful answer, at least. And no doubt contentment is better than ambition."

"I don't know what contentment is, except by seeing it in the faces of cows and pigs. No passion could be stifled by such a tepid feeling as that. I am not contented, I am happy. So will you be some day, and you will let your bright wits rest a little while, and you will understand."

Understand? No, she felt that was impossible, as she looked down at the big, handsome man sitting on the hammock below her, his eyes bright, not with serene, but with ardent happiness, content to bend all his faculties to the will of a creature whom he must know to be his inferior in every way. She did not wish to understand such a decadence as that.

"Then you will give up all idea of writing?"

"No. I am more anxious to distinguish myself than ever, as things have turned out. A man who suddenly finds himself to be married to a rich wife feels as if he had got off

at a false start, and is put at a disadvantage. But so far I own my wife has taken up all my time. You see, she didn't know she was going to be rich any more than I did, and being hardly more than a child, she wants as much looking after at first as a baby at the edge of a pond."

"And this is the sort of woman who gets a man's best love!" thought Ella half bitterly, half disdainfully.

"And of course you choose her friends for her," suggested Ella, not quite hiding her feeling.

"I can't quite do that, yet at least," said George. "Nobody but all of you has got further than acquaintance yet."

"But of course you are very particular about those acquaintances?"

Decidedly Ella was in her most disagreeable mood to-night.

"I do my best," said he briefly.

"And of course it's all nonsense about the smoking-parties, and Captain Pascoe being there nearly every night."

George felt a shock. Mentioned in that manner, the evening calls of his friends, the admittance among the callers of a man whom he cordially disliked but whom he had no grounds strong enough for insulting, were heavy accusations.

"I see my own friends as freely as I did when I was a bachelor, certainly," said he, cold in his turn. "Nouna is too sensible to prevent that. As for Captain Pascoe, he has not been in our house more than three times at the outside."

Ella dared not say more on this subject, even if she had had more to say. She looked out at the swallows, flying low over the young trees of the plantation on the other side of the road, and asked musingly:

"Do you like being rich?"

"It's not bad for a change," answered George philosophically.

"I hate it. I always feel with papa, so glad to shake off the big house and the footmen and the feeling that the great human world is surging round without touching you, and to get back to my tiny room where I can almost water the plants in my window without coming in at the door, and to the farm and my pensioners that I take tracts to. They never read them, but it is quite as much a matter of

etiquette to leave them as it is to make calls in town, and they are dreadfully insulted if I forget."

"But you've always been well off?"

"Yes, but that doesn't make any difference. Money rolls together in such ugly fashions. Look at mamma's. When her father made his millions, thousands of people were ruined. Well, you know, that's horrible!"

"They chose to speculate, remember. They must have known no lottery has all prizes."

"It's hideous to think of, all the same. On the other hand, if your property descends to you by a long line of greedy land-scrapers, you know it has grown in value because other people's has decreased, and that your tenants have to pinch themselves to make up your handsome rent-roll. And you haven't even done the wretched work for it that the speculator has done to get his!"

"It's lucky all capitalists are not so soft-hearted, or there'd be an end to enterprise, which by the by is brother to your god Ambition."

"Oh, I'm not making preparations for re-organising the universe, only lifting up a little weak mew of discontent with my corner of it. And your wife's money: is it the result of a robbery of recent date, like ours, or plunder that has been rolling down for generations, like Lord Florence-court's?"

"Well, really, I've never put it to her trustees in that way, and, now I think of it, why I really don't know. But as Nouna's father was a soldier, and there's very little loot to be got in our days, I expect it has rolled down."

"And you don't really care how it was got together?"

"Yes, I do, now I think of it. But to tell you the truth, the lawyers have managed things so easily for us that all we've been called upon to do is to spend the money, a very elementary process."

"What a strange thing!"

"Why? By the by, so it is, when one comes to think about it. It's altogether contrary to one's personal and traditional experience of lawyers."

"When mamma married," said Ella, pursuing her own train of thought, "her money was tied up and fenced round with as many precautions as if poor dear old papa had been a brigand. He often laughs about it, and says she couldn't

buy a pair of gloves without a power of attorney. So that it really does seem very astonishing."

"It does," assented George, who, never before having had experience of money in any but infinitesimal quantities, had been much readier to take things for granted than was this granddaughter of a Chicago millionaire.

"What would you do, George, if you found out it had been made by supplying bad bayonets to the English army, or anything like that?" she asked, half-laughing, but not without a secret wonder whether this easy-got gold would turn out to have unimpeachable antecedents.

The question gave George a great shock. He jumped up from the hammock across which he had been sitting, with a white face.

"Good heavens, Ella! What makes you say that?" he asked in a low voice, each word sounding as if it were being ground out of him.

"Don't take it like that," said she nervously, almost as much moved as he, and impelled by his strong feeling to be more impressed than she had been at first with her own surmise. "I only suggested—it came into my head—I don't know anything about it."

"Oh, well, you shouldn't say things like that, you know, Ella, even in fun. The mere suggestion gives one such an awful shock. It's like cold water down one's back," said he, trying to laugh.

"I didn't mean it, indeed," said she, quite unable to take a jesting tone. "As if one would say a thing like that in earnest! I never guessed you would think twice about a foolish speech like that!"

But they both felt uncomfortable; and both were glad when George, noticing that Dicky Wood was standing near anxious to get a word with the jolly nice girl Ella, but much too diffident to come forward at the risk of intruding unwelcomely upon a *tête-à-tête*, drew him into their group by asking if he had been in Norfolk before.

And so both George and Ella were able to shuffle off the burden of a conversation which had grown decidedly difficult to keep up, and the memory of which made a slight constraint between them, on the man's side especially, for two or three days.

Nouna, to her husband's great comfort and gladness, was behaving beautifully, and putting new life by her gaiety into the

whole household, the younger members of which, in spite of Ella's intelligence and her sisters' beauty, were a little wanting in those electric high spirits which, in the routine of a quiet country-house, are as sunshine to the crops. The day after their arrival was Sunday, and the morning church-going had been a fiery ordeal for George, not from religious indifference, but from the misgiving that if Nouna could not keep from smiling in the course of a well-conducted service in a West End church, she would certainly be carried out in convulsions from the Willingham place of worship, where the school children, summer and winter, sniffed through the service in a distressing chorus, while the loud-voiced clerk's eccentric English rang through the building, drowning the old vicar's feeble voice ; and where the vicar's wife, a strong-minded lady, whose district-visiting was a sort of assize, had been known to "pull up" her reverend husband publicly from her pew immediately below the pulpit when, as not infrequently happened, he turned over two leaves of his sermon instead of one, and went quietly on as if nothing had happened. "Turned over two leaves? Bless me, so I have!" he would murmur, and rectify his mistake with a tranquil nod.

So George had put his wife through a very severe drill before starting, and had strictly forbidden her so much as to sneeze without his permission. She had a narrow escape at the offertory, when one of the churchwardens, with a lively remembrance of the artifices of his own youth, shovelled a penny into the fingers of each of his offspring with one hand, while he presented the plate menacingly with the other. But glancing up at her husband and perceiving a frown of acute terror on his face, she contrived to choke in silence ; and the day was gained.

On the following Monday too, when the dreaded Lady Florencecourt fulfilled her threat of calling and proved equal to her reputation for unamiability, the young wife was, as she triumphantly averred afterwards, "very good." The county censor proved to be a fair, florid woman of middle height, rather stout, and with features so commonplace that, without the saving shield of her title, they would have been called common. She had arrogant and capricious manners, an oily self-satisfied voice, and an ill word for everybody. Whenever her husband, who accompanied her on this occasion, ventured to make a remark, she turned to look at him with

a resigned air, as if she were used to being made a martyr at the stake of his imbecility. She examined Nouna from head to foot through a gold double eyeglass, as if the young wife had been a charity-girl convicted of misconduct, and made no remark to her except to ask her if she was interested in the Zenana Missions, to which Nouna replied rather haughtily that Indian ladies were no more in need of missionaries than English ones: after which thrust and counter-thrust it may be imagined that the conversation languished, and that later in the day George had great difficulty in persuading his wife not to break off their engagement to go to Willingham. She said it would just spoil the end of their visit to the Millards, for one of whom she had begun to feel a real affection. This was the sharp-tongued Ella, whose intelligence she had the wit to recognise, and whose smart sayings amused her.

It was on the evening of a day in the course of which this oddly-assorted pair of friends had been a good deal together that George, on going up stairs to his room after a last cigar with his host, found his wife, not as usual fast asleep like a child, but perched upon the bed in the attitude of a Hindoo idol, with a big book open on her crossed knees, and her eyes fixed upon the nearest candle.

"Hallo!" said he, "what's the matter?"

She turned her eyes upon him slowly, with an air of suspicion and curiosity.

"Nothing is the matter," she said gravely, and turning down a whole half-leaf of the book before her to keep the place, she closed it carefully, and handed it to him with an affectation of solemn indifference. "I have been reading," she added with decision.

George looked at the title of the ponderous volume, and observed that it was *The Complete Works of Xenophon*. He opened it without a smile at the page she had turned down, and remarking that it was about half-way through the volume, said she had got on very well if she had read so much in one evening.

"I skipped a little—the dry parts," she observed modestly, but in such a tone that it was impossible for George to tell whether she meant to be taken seriously or not.

"Dry!" he exclaimed, raising his eyebrows, "why, he is the very lightest of light reading. Xenophon was the

most frivolous man I ever knew; he was at school with me."

She crawled to the foot of the bed, and stretching over the rail to the dressing-table, on which George had placed the volume, she recovered it with a violent muscular effort, and turned back the leaves to the title-page.

"This book was published in 1823; so you are much older than you told me you were, I see," she said simply, while George, unable to contain himself longer, burst out into a long laugh, and made a dive at her, which she evaded like a squirrel, still staring at him with unmoved gravity, so that his mirth died away in wonderment and in a rush of tenderness as he perceived the pathos of this futile plunge into the mazes of learning.

As he recovered his gravity the expression of her mobile face also changed; after a moment's shy silence their eyes met, and each saw the other through a luminous mist.

"What are you crying for?" she asked tremulously; and in a moment flung herself impulsively into his ready arms. "Why didn't you marry Ella?" was her next question, shot suddenly into his ear in the midst of an incoherent outburst of the passionate tenderness that glowed ever in his heart for her.

"Marry Ella!" said he, feeling a shock of surprise at the remembrance that he had indeed once offered to make the good little blue-stocking his wife. "Why, what makes you ask such a question as that? Are you jealous?"

"Oh, no. But I see that she would have had you, and therefore you were foolish not to have her."

"Well, I'm afraid it's too late now, and I shall have to put up with the consequences of my folly," said he, pressing her tenderly to him.

"That's just what I thought," she agreed quite plaintively. "Miss Glass says a good wife must cook, Ella says a good wife must read, but nobody says a good wife must just sing and laugh and amuse herself as I do. And so when you're tired of kissing me, you will feel you had better not have married me, but only have amused yourself like Dicky Wood—" She paused significantly.

"Dicky Wood!" echoed he sharply.

"—With Chloris White."

George moved uneasily; he was angry and disturbed.

"You must not say such things—you must not think them. The name of such a woman as that is not fit to pass your lips."

"But, George," she argued, looking straight into his eyes with penetrating shrewdness, "if you had not been you, say, if you had been Rahas or Captain Pascoe, I might—"

He stopped the words upon her lips with a great gravity which awed her and kept her very still, very attentive, while he spoke.

"When God throws an innocent girl into the arms of an honest man, Nouna, as you came into mine, she is a sacred gift, received with such reverent love that she must always hold herself holy and pure, and never even let any thought of evil come into her heart, so that she may be the blessing God intended. I was born into the world to protect you and shield you from harm, my darling; and so my love was ready for you at the moment when your innocence might have put you in danger, just as it will be to the end of your life."

"Supposing you were to die first?" suggested she, not flippantly, but with an awestruck consideration of possibilities.

"A soldier can always last out till his duty's done," said George, with quiet conviction.

After this Nouna remained silent a little while, but that her ideas had not been working in quite the desired direction was evident when she next spoke.

"If, as you say, your love will keep me safe and good whatever I do, I needn't be so particular," she argued, "and it won't do me any harm to go and see this Mrs. Chloris White, and ask her to leave poor Dicky alone, and let him meet some one who will be a blessing to *him*. I want him to marry Ella."

George was thunderstruck.

"Go and see Chloris White! I'd as soon let you go to the Morgue!"

"But I know I could persuade her to give him up; I know just what I would say, just how I would look. I've thought it all over; and surely anything's better than that he should rush back to her as soon as he gets to town, and undo all the good we've done him in the country."

She spoke with a pretty little matronly air of perfectly sincere benevolence.

"My dear child," said her husband decisively, laying his hand on her head with his gravest air of authority, "you cannot go; it is out of the question. You must not even mention such a wild idea to any one; they would be horribly shocked. But we'll keep poor Dicky safe among us by much better means than that. I promise you. So now go to sleep, and don't ever let such an idea come into your head again."

She let herself be kissed quite brightly and submissively, and rubbed her cheek against his with affection which might have been taken to argue docility. But her own fantastic notion of helping her friend remained in her mind quite unmoved by her husband's prohibition.

CHAPTER XX.

WHEN the time came for them to finish their stay in Norfolk by the dreaded three days at Willingham, neither George nor Nouna made any secret of the fact that they felt the coming visit to be a severe ordeal. Undoubtedly it would be a cruelly abrupt change from the cheerful homeliness of the Lodge, to the penitential atmosphere in which the household of Lady Florencecourt passed their days. So notorious was the character of the gracious *châtelaine* that Willingham Hall was commonly known in the neighbourhood as the House of Correction, a title to which the severely simple style of its architecture gave no very flat denial. Willingham Church stood in the grounds belonging to the Hall, so that Nouna had had an opportunity of shuddering at the sombre dreariness of the mansion even before the return call she had made with Lady Millard and Cicely, on which occasion she had sat almost mute on a high-backed chair, looking as insignificant and unhappy as a starved mouse, thinking that Lady Florencecourt's light eyes looked like the glass marbles with which she played at *solitaire*, and what a good model her face would be for one of those indiarubber heads that children squeeze up into grotesque grimaces.

She cried at parting with the Millards, like a little girl sent to school for the first time. Sir Henry, with his simple good humour; Lady Millard, with her quiet manners, and the quick black eyes whose flashing keenness and sympathy showed the burning soul of the New World flickering in uneasy brightness among the glowing embers of the Old; Cicely and Charlotte, fair, kind creatures, who filled up the pauses gracefully, the one by merely smiling, the other by a gentle rain of chatter which she had been taught to think a fascinating social accomplishment; and, above all, Ella, of

the sallow face, the sharp tongue, and the warm heart, were a group to live pleasantly in the memory, and to make the approaching encounter with the unamiable hosts of Willingham more disagreeable by contrast. It added to poor Nouna's forlornness in these circumstances that her husband absolutely forbade her taking Sundran with her, as, although he was very anxious for an accidental meeting between Lord Florencecourt and the Indian woman, he felt that he could not force upon his host the presence of a person to whom, if only as the result of a prejudice, he had a strong aversion.

Lady Florencecourt sent a lumbering old family travelling carriage, with powdered footmen and bewigged coachmen, to bring Mr. and Mrs. Lauriston to the Hall. Nouna rather liked this old-world state, which, as her education had embraced the experiences of Paul Clifford and Martin Blakeborough of "The King's Mail," stimulated her imagination. She crammed her little fingers tightly into her husband's hand as they entered the long straight drive, with a deep grass border on each side flanked by tall trees, which led up to Willingham Hall.

"Keep up your spirits, George," she quavered, as the carriage drew up at the imposing front door. "There aren't any spikes to get over if we have to run away."

And she entered the hall with the air of a prisoner who hopes he'll get off because he's such a little one. They were shown up to their room at once, and when they came down to the drawing-rooms, which were a succession of vast wildernesses, with all the defects of apartments too large for the human atoms who lived in them, they found, to Nouna's great relief, that not only was the great Mr. Birch there already, but he had brought with him a real live daughter, a girl about twenty, who seemed just as much relieved by the sight of a young face as Nouna herself was. Lord Florencecourt was there, looking as if he had been kept in against his will from the society of his boys; and Lady Florencecourt, who made it a boast that she never interrupted her charitable work for anybody, worked away at certain hideous convict-like garments, which she was knitting in very coarse scrubby gray wool for the unlucky poor, while she held forth on the ingratitude of the "masses," the vicious extravagance of the "classes," and the shortcomings of everybody all round; while Mr. Birch, who was a bald-headed man with a great expanse of knobby forehead, which was in itself a

tower of strength to his party, agreed with everything—perhaps a habit he had contracted at Westminster.

The two younger ladies drew instinctively nearer and nearer each other, until they were close enough to grow confidential, and to enter upon a strictly defensive alliance. By the time Lord Florencecourt suggested an excursion through the grounds to see the ruins of an old Norman church which had been built at the same period as the one still standing, and within a stone's throw of it, adversity had made Nouna and Miss Birch inseparable as love-birds. Before the evening was over, little Mrs. Lauriston had reason to congratulate herself on having found such an ally. For her acid hostess treated her with only the barest possible show of civility, and Lord Florencecourt, while making a determined effort to be more courteous, betrayed in his eyes such a rooted and cold dislike that Nouna, with her strong sensitiveness to every shade of feeling in the people with whom she came in contact, shrank into herself and was completely miserable, casting forlorn glances across the table at her husband, who felt scarcely happier than she, but in whom was growing stronger every moment the determination to learn the reason of an invitation which had evidently sprung from no spontaneous wish either of host or hostess. Two other guests had joined the party before dinner, an elderly couple named Admiral and Mrs. Bohun, very old friends of Lord Florencecourt's. Neither added much to the liveliness of the circle, but whether from native dulness or through Lady Florencecourt's peculiar gift of causing the people about her to show always at their worst in her society, did not appear. At all events, when the ladies left the room at dessert, Nouna was so much overcome by the dire prospect before her that she slipped round to her husband, and hissed into his ear, in a doleful and not altogether inaudible whisper:

“Don't be long, or you won't find me alive!”

She had not under-estimated the relaxation of the drawing-room. Throughout the length of the suite of cold-looking apartments wax-lights flickered weakly in numbers wholly inadequate to the size of the rooms. The piano had been opened, and Lady Florencecourt invited the younger ladies to play; as Miss Birch hesitated, with not unnatural diffidence before such an audience, Nouna rushed recklessly into the breach, regardless of the fact that she was a totally incompetent performer.

"I knew she'd go back to her knitting, and that's in the furthest room," she volunteered in explanation, as the elder ladies sailed away.

But the astounding badness of her performance soon brought Lady Florencecourt back, not indeed so much to criticise as to find out whether the curious sounds the instrument was giving forth were not the result of an excursion of her Blenheim spaniel along the keys.

"Is that Indian music, Mrs. Lauriston? Something that is usually played to an accompaniment of tom-toms?" asked Lady Florencecourt, holding up her glasses, not, however, before she had ascertained that she was listening to a mangled version of "Auld Robin Gray."

"Yes, it's an 'Invocation to a Witch,'" answered Nouna imperturbably. "It ends like this, all the tom-toms together," and she put her arms down upon the piano with a crash.

Her face was perfectly grave, but she began to feel the promptings of a wicked imp within her, urging her to rebel against this most unwarrantable discipline to which she was being subjected. Mrs. Bohun had followed her hostess, and as Nouna rose abruptly from the piano, the old lady said gently :

"You mustn't be offended by my saying so, but it seems impossible to realise that you are a married woman. You must have been married while you were still in short frocks!"

Nouna, who wore an elaborate dinner-dress of emerald-green velvet, with loose folds of Nile green silk falling straight from her neck to her feet, was for a moment rather crestfallen to find how little dignity a train could give.

"Ye-es," she said reluctantly. "But I wear long ones now. And I'm sixteen."

Mrs. Bohun smiled. "That is very young for the responsibilities of a wife."

"I haven't any responsibilities," answered Nouna quickly. "My mother gives me an allowance—or at least the lawyers do; at any rate, I have one."

"But isn't that a responsibility?" asked the old lady, much amused.

"Oh, no. I just spend it, and then mamma has the responsibility of sending me some more."

Neither Mrs. Bohun nor Miss Birch could keep her

countenance at this *naïve* disclosure, but its effect upon Lady Florencecourt was to make her grow grimmer than ever.

"I'm sure it's a very nice thing to have such a good mamma," said Mrs. Bohun indulgently. "Don't you think so, Clarissa?"

"Undoubtedly."

The tone in which Lady Florencecourt gave this short answer, caused Nouna to look up at her.

"Do you know my mother?" she asked abruptly.

"I have not that honour," answered Lady Florencecourt, many degrees below zero.

Quite unmoved this time by her hostess's frigidity, Nouna mused a few moments with her eyes fixed on the lady's face. Then she said slowly:

"I believe Lord Florencecourt knows mamma though _____"

She stopped short, bewildered by the sudden change these few words brought about in the placid, self-satisfied countenance. Then, as there was a moment's awkward pause, she went on hurriedly—"At least, I know mamma has an old portrait—one of those old-fashioned dark things with glass over them, that is like him. I knew when I met him first at the barracks that I had seen his face somewhere, and when I thought, I remembered the picture."

Now Nouna had begun to speak in all innocence, but when she noticed that her words had some magical power of discomposing the woman who had been discourteous to her, she mischievously slackened her tone, and watched the effect with much interest. Lady Florencecourt's square heavy face was not capable of any very vivid or varied expression when her usual stolid self-complacency had been frightened out of it. But the lower features quivered slightly, and a vixenish look, which boded ill for her husband's peace during their next *tête-à-tête*, brought a spark of angry brightness into her light eyes. Her next speech, and the tone in which it was uttered, gave the same impression.

"Very possibly," she said in a voice which implied an offensive doubt. "Of course, my husband, when he was a subaltern in India, gave his portrait right and left to all sorts of persons, as young men will do."

"In India! He has been in India! Oh, then that accounts for it. He must have met my mother there. I'll ask him."

And as the voices of the gentlemen were heard in the hall, Nouna prepared for a spring at the door. Lady Florencecourt laid a heavy hand peremptorily on her arm.

"No," she said in a suddenly subdued voice, retaining her hold on the fragile wrist, and looking down into the little creature's eyes with some entreaty and even fear in her own. "Don't tease Lord Florencecourt about it now. I—I want to talk to you."

She drew Nouna with her towards an ottoman, and invited Mrs. Bohun to join them.

"I quite agree with you, Harriet ; it is a wonderful thing in these days to have a mamma to appeal to," she continued, in a kind of grudgingly gracious tone. "Mrs. Lauriston is quite the only person I know who is not suffering from this horrible depression in everything. I don't know whether you have heard"—and she lowered her voice to a confidential murmur—"that my husband wants to get rid of Willingham. All the tenants are asking for twenty-five per cent. reduction on their rent, and as you see, Lord Florencecourt has given up the shooting this year. Even I have had to make some sacrifices, and to dispose of part of my jewellery."

Nouna was touched. Such a misfortune as this appealed to her imagination, and this most unexpected, uncalled-for candour disarmed her antagonism.

"Your jewellery ! Oh, how dreadful !" she cried with deep sympathy. "I think I could bear anything but that."

She glanced down at one of the diamond bracelets her mother had sent her on her wedding-day, and hugged the little arm that bore it close to her breast. Mrs. Bohun sympathised less sensationally.

"Dear me !" she said gently. "Not your pearls, I hope, Clarissa ?"

"Yes, my necklace ; the double row with the dragon clasp."

"Dragon clasp !" repeated Nouna quickly.

"Yes, it had a very uncommon clasp : a dragon in diamonds, with ruby eyes."

Nouna stared at her with open mouth, in a manner which would have excited remark in anybody but this eccentric little person ; but she offered no further observation,

although she remained seated near the elderly ladies, considering Lady Florencecourt's face with deep interest, until the boys came in for a dull half-hour in the drawing-room. To them the lively little lady was an unexpected blessing. By the time the butler marched in with a huge Bible and Prayer-book, Nouna was sitting on a sofa, with Regie leaning over her shoulder and Bertie's arms round her neck, to the great scandal of Lady Florencecourt, who regarded her sons rather as a handsome present she had made to their father than with any more vulgarly maternal feeling, and who would have been shocked at such a breach of filial respect as a spontaneous hug.

Nouna, who found nothing very exhilarating in the assembled company after the departure of the boys, seized the very first opportunity to retire, and was up stairs before anybody else. When her husband followed a little later, he found the door of the room wide open, the candles flickering and guttering in the draught, but no Nouna. Her jewel-case was open on the dressing-table, and the contents were scattered about in reckless disorder, a bracelet lying on the floor, a diamond earring glistening on the top of a high-heeled boot, a couple of rings embedded in a hair-brush. George looked into the dressing-room, and then went back into the corridor, where he heard a long way off the rattling of the Fiji shells on his wife's dress. He drew back into the room, and received her in his arms as she rushed through the door like a whirlwind. She gave a little cry when he caught her.

"Where have you been?" he asked.

"Where have I been? Oh, nowhere; only speaking to Lady Florencecourt's maid."

"What about?"

"Nothing. I wish you had let me bring Sundran; I can't do my own hair."

"Why, it isn't much longer than a boy's. I might as well say I couldn't do mine. I'll be your maid to-night."

She made no objection, but quietly tilted up her chin as an intimation that he might unfasten her frock for her, with such an unusual air of reflective absorption that he stopped in the midst of his careful but clumsy ministrations to ask her what she was thinking about.

"Nothing," said she, as her glance fell on her scattered trinkets.

"What have you been doing with your jewellery?" And he picked up some of the ill-used treasures and piled them up in the velvet tray. "Why, where's the pearl necklace that you keep on the top?"

He saw a slight but rapid change in her face which convinced him that he was, as the children say at hide and seek, "warm."

"Have you lost it? Is that the trouble?" he asked kindly.

"There's no trouble. I left it at home," she answered with so much vivacity and mendacious promptitude that George saw it would be of no use to ask more questions.

On the following morning, however, his curiosity was appeased in an unexpected and startling manner. As soon as he appeared at the breakfast-table, he was conscious of a decided change for the worse in the already chilly and depressing atmosphere. If Lady Florencecourt had been cool, her husband constrained, the day before, the lady was an icicle, her lord a statue this morning. Lord Florencecourt avoided him, would not meet his eyes, and absolutely—so it seemed to George—slunk out of the way of Nouna altogether; while his wife maintained all through breakfast such a frigid attitude to both the young couple, that George was boiling with indignation before the meal was ended, and contrived to meet his hostess alone within a few minutes of the break-up of the party. He had some difficulty in keeping the anger he felt from bursting through the formal speeches in which he told her of an unexpected summons which would force him and his wife to curtail their visit and return to town that very morning.

"As soon as you please, Mr. Lauriston," said Lady Florencecourt, icily. "And as I may not have another opportunity of seeing your wife alone, perhaps you will be kind enough to return this to her"—she handed George a small parcel, through a torn corner of which peeped the pearls he supposed Nouna to have lost—"and to inform her that though, like other ladies, I am forced to submit to be robbed by my husband to deck out another woman, I am not reduced to receiving back my own jewels from her hands when she has done with them."

George looked at her very steadily, and gave no sign of the tempest within him except the trembling of his hands.

"I will give this packet, not to my wife, but to your

husband, madam," said he in a very low voice. At that moment Lord Florencecourt's footsteps were heard outside the door, and George added: "I shall not have to wait for an opportunity."

Upon the first sound of her husband's tread, the lady had visibly quailed, in spite of her Amazonian reputation: as he entered the room, and with a searching glance seemed to take in at once the chief features of the situation, she made an attempt to walk majestically to the door.

"Stop," said he, raising his hand a very little way; "I want to speak to you. Mr. Lauriston," he went on, turning formally to the young man, who noticed that his nervousness of the morning had given place to a look of steady determination, "if my wife has had the folly and bad taste to insult you, I apologise for her, and beg that you will take no steps consequent upon her impertinence until you have first had an interview with me."

"I shall be glad to have that interview as soon as possible, Lord Florencecourt, as I must leave your house this morning."

"In five minutes, if you like. In the meantime, if you wish to ask questions about that infernal gewgaw," and he looked savagely at the necklace, which George had torn from its covering, "I will tell you at once I did not give it to your wife, as Lady Florencecourt persists in imagining, but I sold it to a dealer without the least idea what was to become of it. Are you satisfied?"

"As to your share in the matter, my lord, perfectly."

"As for my wife, she shall apologise to you herself."

"There is no need for any apology," said George, without condescending to look in the direction of the lady. "I am quite satisfied with your explanation."

He left the husband and wife together, and finding Nouna, who was in a state of tearful anger against the dragon, he helped her to pack her trunk, and then filled and fastened his own portmanteau. These tasks were scarcely finished when Lady Florencecourt, pale, trembling, meek as a startled lamb, her eyes red with violent crying, her whole manner so utterly subdued and abject as to make one doubt her identity, knocked at the door, and finding them engaged in packing, begged them most earnestly to forget her impatience of the morning and to stay, as they had intended, until the Monday. Poor Nouna was so much affected by

the evident distress of this haughty personage, that she burst into tears and put her arms round her, assuring her that she had not noticed any impatience at all, and that she would be glad to stay. But George, whose masculine nature was not so easily melted, persisted quietly but firmly that they were obliged to return to London at once. Whereupon Lady Florencecourt extracted a promise from Nouna that she would come to dinner as soon as they should all return to town.

"Oh yes," said Nouna readily, "I want to see the dear boys again; I always like boys, but I never liked any so well as Regie and Bertie."

At these words Lady Florencecourt fell a-trembling again most unaccountably, and she soon withdrew to order the carriage to take her guests to the station.

It was a most uncomfortable leave-taking. In spite of her importunities, Nouna could not see the boys again; Lady Florencecourt was as much too humbly cordial as she had before been too loftily cold; and Lord Florencecourt, who accompanied them to the station, hid a painful nervousness under his usual shield of impenetrable reserve. At the station, however, a little incident occurred which laid bare his defences in an untoward manner.

In an honourable determination not to lead Lord Florencecourt into any meeting with the Indian woman which could bear the appearance of a trap, George had ordered Sundran to return to town at once, and to get everything ready for her mistress's return on Monday. But Sundran had lost the train, and had to put off her journey; so that she was in the station on Saturday morning, waiting to go by the very train in which her master and mistress so hastily decided to travel. She was waiting on the platform, a limp bundle of white clothes, too proud to take shelter in the waiting-room from curious glances, but flashing looks of grand contempt around her with her black eyes, when she caught sight of her young mistress in the doorway, and hastened up to her with a low cry of loving welcome. The train was coming up, and as it was market day, there was a bustling and mildly-excited crowd on the platform, jostling one another with baskets, and chivying to madness the solitary porter. In the confusion Lord Florencecourt was for a few moments separated from his departing guests, whom he rejoined just as Nouna had mounted into an empty compart-

ment, and was handing her sunshade to Sundran, who was standing on the doorstep. George stood on the platform, much excited ; as soon as he caught sight of Lord Florencecourt, for whom the crowd made way with respectful recognition, he told Sundran sharply that he had got a seat for her, and she must come to it at once. She stepped down, and he put his hand on her arm, and made her turn her back to Lord Florencecourt, and run. In doing so she dropped Nouna's sunshade. Before George could prevent her she had stopped, wheeled round to pick it up, and seen the Colonel face to face.

With a hoarse and guttural cry she drew herself upright, pointing at him with a lean, dark finger.

"Captain Weston!" she hissed out fiercely, while her black eyes flashed, and her fingers clenched as if she would have flown at his throat.

Lord Florencecourt saw her ; over his rugged features a dull flush spread, dying again quickly ; he raised his hat mechanically, not looking at Nouna ; and without any change in the fixed expression of dead reserve he had worn all the morning, turned and made his way through the yielding crowd out of the station. George bundled Sundran into a carriage, and went back to his wife just in time to jump in as the train started.

A quick, shy glance at her face told him she had heard the Indian woman's words.

CHAPTER XXI.

GEORGE LAURISTON was not a dull-witted man ; but the shock of astonishment he suffered when Sundran recognised Lord Florencecourt as " Captain Weston," for a few moments paralysed his thoughts and prevented his realising all the complications to which the discovery gave rise. His first thought was for its effect upon his wife.

He scarcely dared to look at her. But after the train had started she came to him and forced her face up into his.

" Did you hear what Sundran said ? " she asked in a loud whisper.

George nodded.

" Do you think it's true ? "

" I don't know, dear."

" What shall you do to Lord Florencecourt if it is true ? "

" Do ? Nothing."

" Won't you ? I shall."

" What ? "

" Kill him for having been cruel to my mother."

She was shaking from head to foot with passion, her eyes lurid as those of a tigress, her white teeth gleaming between thirstily parted lips, as if they would tear the flesh from the bones of the man whose imputed offence in being her father was not yet even proved. George was silent, beset by a crowd of conjectures no less mysterious than unpleasant. She suddenly leaped upon him, seizing his shoulders with small hands that griped tight as claws.

" Well ! " she said impatiently. " Well ! You say nothing ! I will have you say something. This Colonel of yours, who beat my mother, and left her and let her think he was dead—is he your respected dear friend now, or do you hate him with your whole soul, as I do ? "

"I can't hate an old friend on the spur of the moment, especially when I don't know what he's done," said George in a tone which had the effect of a few drops of water on a fire.

"Don't know what he's done! Haven't I told you all Sundran has said about the way he used to treat my mother, my beautiful darling mother; how he was harsh, and wicked, and jealous, and ran away from her when I was a little baby? Why did he call himself Captain Weston, when his real name was Lord Florencecourt, if he meant to be a good true husband to her? Was that like the noble English gentlemen you talk about, and poor mamma talks about?"

"His name was not always Lord Florencecourt," said George rather meekly.

He knew that the Colonel's name had never been Captain Weston; and that there were circumstances in this affair of which Lord Florencecourt was by no means proud had been amply shown by the mixture of constraint, dislike, and fear which had marked his behaviour to Nouna since his first meeting with her at the barracks. "And perhaps Sundran was mistaken," he suggested in the same tone.

But Nouna laughed this idea to scorn, and he himself had nothing to offer in support of it. The Indian woman's recognition was the first sign he had had of a clue to all the mysterious circumstances surrounding his marriage; and if it raised new doubts and suggested new entanglements, at any rate it pointed out one person near at hand who could, if he would, unravel them. George determined to see Lord Florencecourt again without delay, and to ask him simply and straightforwardly whether he was Nouna's father, and if so, why he had thought it necessary to conceal the fact from him. The young husband thought he could now understand the strange reserve of Madame di Valdestillas, who, as the circumstances seemed to suggest, having been deceived in early youth by Lord Florencecourt, then masquerading as Captain Weston, was naturally anxious to conceal the evidence of her past indiscretion, and had therefore caused her child to be educated away from her, and had probably concealed Nouna's very existence from her husband. In that case, Nouna's mushroom sprung up fortune could not have been a testamentary provision of her father, as he was still alive. Where then did the money come from? George remembered with a shock Lord

Florencecourt's late complaints of an unexpected and heavy drain on resources which he knew to be by no means limitless, and the remarkable incident of the pearl necklace flamed up unpleasantly in his mind. This, together with the grudgingly given invitation to Willingham, and the socially important visit extracted by the Colonel from his sister to Nouna, seemed to point to a considerable influence being still exerted over Lord Florencecourt by Madame di Valdestillas, in spite of his unconcealed prejudice against dark-skinned women. Whether by tickling his remorse or his fear of publicity, the lady played very skilfully to be able to levy such substantial blackmail upon her former lover.

These conjectures ran in George's head and absorbed him so completely, that Nouna, who was sitting in the opposite corner and gazing out of window with a pretty imitation of deep abstraction, found, on turning suddenly to direct his attention to a stack of red-tiled roofs and towering chimneys nestling, in Christmas-card prettiness, among trees in a hollow near the line, something deeply fascinating in the fact that he was, for the first time since their marriage, completely oblivious of her presence. She paused with her mouth open for speech, considering him in wonderment, noting the lines of the frown on his forehead, and the dull, steady outlook of clouded eyes that for once did not see her. Then she stooped forward, and, with her hands on his knees, stretched up to peer closely into his face. He started, and his eyes turned upon her with a look in which she saw, or fancied she saw, so much sternness, that her hands slipped off his knees, and she fell, a meek and frightened human bundle, on to the floor of the carriage. George snatched her up and crushed her tiny limbs against him with a sudden thrill of passionate tenderness in which she discerned at once some new and unknown element. She sunned herself in his caresses for a few moments and then looked inquiringly into his eyes.

"You have begun a new wooing," she whispered, peeping up with languid eyes. "You are very sweet to me, but you seem to be asking me something I don't understand."

"I don't know, my darling, whether I could make you understand."

"Kiss me again to prepare me, and then try."

He obeyed the first direction and then set about carrying out the second.

"What would you do, my darling, if you had to give up your pretty house, your rooms full of flowers, your dainty marble bath, your French frocks and your crowds of visitors?"

Her reply was prompt and crushing, spoken with passionate conviction. "I should die." Then she turned upon him in alarmed eagerness: "What has happened that I should give them up? They are my own, they are natural to me; it is not right that the granddaughter of a Maharajah should be without these things!"

"But supposing you found out that you were enjoying them at the expense of others who had a better right to them still, who were born to them, and had to go without them for your pleasure. Oh, Nouna, you have a generous little heart, you would not bear that!"

She shook her head incredulously.

"You forget," said she, "it was through my mother that my fortune came to me. Mamma would never do anything that was not right and just. What she says is mine, that I may enjoy without fear of wrong."

She was secure now behind the rampart of her religion, and he perceived that he could only convert her through the mother she adored. So he let the subject drop, inwardly deciding that his next move, after seeing Lord Florence-court, must be to find out where Madame di Valdestillas and her husband were staying, and come to an understanding with that lady as to the duties owed by a woman to her daughter's husband as well as to her own.

Determined not to trouble his wife again with premature hints of such a desolating kind that she had already burst open her dressing-bag to shed tears over the portable evidence of her accession to fortune—her diamonds—he spoke of indifferent things, and asked, for want of something better, if she knew what had become of Dicky Wood since he left Maple Lodge a few days before they did. Nouna's face seemed suddenly to contract, and she darted at her husband a curiously cautious glance, shifting immediately back to the contents of her bag.

"I'm afraid—" she began. "They say he has got back into the power of—of that woman, you know," she ended with a nod, seeing a cloud form upon her husband's face which forbade her to let the name of such a person pass her lips.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said he, being indeed more grieved at his wife's knowledge of and interest in the affair than at the foolish boy's falling again into the hot water out of which he had been once so thoughtfully fished.

"Yes," she assented, and with unusual and remarkable reticence she pursued the subject no further.

George's masculine wits failed to see more in this circumstance than respect for his prejudice against her interesting herself in such themes. She had calmed down very suddenly, he thought, from her outburst of violent indignation against the Colonel. No one could have imagined, to see her now trifling first with a scent-bottle and then with a fan, that only half an hour had passed since she learnt, in a startling manner, a secret concerning her parentage momentous enough to set the most volatile creature thinking. And then it occurred to him that this secret, so new to him, might not be altogether new to her. Candour is not an Oriental virtue, and experience had already shown him that Nouna was by nature secretive, and much more likely to keep her own counsel even in hours of amorous confidence than he or any other babbling foolish Samson of a male lover. He recalled certain confidential looks and tones he had observed between her and the lawyer, Mr. Smith, on her wedding-day ; he recollected various injunctions from Madame di Valdestillas that Nouna should in all things pertaining to the marriage put herself without question into the old solicitor's hands. The result of these musings was that George, determined by yet another flash of remembrance, marked down for his second step in this matter a visit to the church where he was married, and an inspection of the register.

The first step he proposed for himself was to question Sundran. It would depend, he knew, upon her own dull and dogged views of what was her mistress's interest whether she would condescend to open her lips to him either for truth or falsehood. But he thought he might be able to prove to her by the evidence of his unquestionable devotion that he could have no aim but her mistress's happiness, and if this could once be made clear to the woman, Lord Florencecourt's careful avoidance of her was enough to show that she could make important revelations.

But George was met on the very threshold of his investigations by an undreamt-of difficulty. When the train

arrived at Liverpool Street he put Nouna at once into a cab, and went back to the train to fetch Sundran, who had not yet found her way to her mistress. But she had disappeared. In vain he examined every compartment in turn, and scanned the crowd on the platform. Inquiries of the porter at last elicited that a dark-skinned woman in white had sprung out of a compartment before the train stopped, and driven off at once in a cab. George returned to his wife, saying simply that Sundran had gone off before them, but as the inspector at the gate of the station took the number of their cab, George called to the driver to stop, and asked the official if he had noticed a black woman pass out, adding that she was his wife's maid, knew very little English, and he was afraid she might have made a mistake with the address.

"I saw her, sir. I think the number of the cab was fifty-seven," said the man, referring to his list.

George thanked him, and the cab drove off. Nouna looked at her husband in astonishment.

"She won't make a mistake, George. Sundran is not so silly."

"I don't think she is. But I want to find out where she's gone."

"Then you think she's run away! Why should she? Where would she go?" asked Nouna breathlessly.

"Well, well, we don't know yet whether she's gone at all."

But when they got home and found that Sundran had not arrived, George decided that he would wait one hour, filling up the time with a visit to the parish church; and then, if she still failed to appear, he would call at 36, Mary Street, where he suspected her to be, on his way to Liverpool Street station. He intended to return to Willingham that night, and get through the interview with the Colonel. A packet of letters was handed to him, in which he found one for his wife. Seeing that the handwriting was masculine and unknown to him, George turned it over jealously.

"Who is this from, Nouna?" he asked, holding it over her head, high above her reach.

A red flood ran at once under the delicate brown skin.

"How can I tell if you hold it all that way off?" she asked, making a futile spring to reach it.

She was much excited, but by what emotion he could not tell.

"Well, now," and he held it near to her face, guarding it with both hands from the expected clutch.

There was enough subdued interest in her manner to make him determined to know the contents of the letter, but not wishing to give himself the airs of a Bluebeard, he drew her on to his knee and gave it to her, at the same time opening one of his own. As he read his he saw that she slipped hers without opening it into some hiding-place among the folds of her dress ; at first he made no remark upon this, but went on with his own letters until he had come to the end of the pile by throwing a couple of circulars into the fireplace. At this point she tried to get away ; she wanted to take her hat off, she said.

"Well, that's soon done," said George laughing, tossing off her little grey cap and passing his fingers through her curls. "And now who is your letter from?"

"Oh, it's only from an old schoolfellow."

"A schoolfellow ! A male schoolfellow ! I must see it then ; I'm jealous."

"There's nothing to be jealous about," said Nouna lightly, but beginning to tremble as she saw that, in spite of the playfulness of his tone, he did not mean to let her go till his curiosity was satisfied. "I haven't even opened it yet."

"Open it now then, and tell me the news."

He spoke quite gently, and leaned back in the arm-chair they were sitting on, leaving her perched upon his knees in what she might have imagined was liberty, if there had not been, to her sharp eyes, a leonine look of possession and passive power in the strong white hands that lay quietly on the arms of the chair on each side of her. These Eastern women have a subtle sense, transmitted to them from bow-stringing times, of what is best to do in a case of jealousy. George saw the quick glance round under lowered eyelids, and while fearing some impish indiscretion, yet with a little smart of rage admired her self-possession as she crossed her knees carelessly and drew forth her letter from her breast, after affecting to feel in her pocket, as if forgetful where she had put it. As she inserted a small forefinger under the flap of the envelope, George held himself on the alert to seize the little hands if they should make any attempt to destroy the missive. But the first glance at the note apparently relieved her, and she flourished it before him to show that he had made a fuss about nothing.

"It is only a note from Captain Pascoe to tell me his address, because he is so anxious to come again to our little suppers," said she, making a ball of the note, tossing it dexterously, catching it in her hand, and posting it between her husband's lips, opened for a little lecture.

"Has he written to you before?" asked George frowning.

"No; if he had I should have known the handwriting," answered she carelessly, but in the meantime by a clever little movement causing the injured note to roll from its lodging-place under George's chin on to the floor. "And now please may I go and change my shoes?"

"Certainly."

George let her go, and, all his senses being still awake to observation, remarked that in searching for a dropped glove she made a long sweep, and picked up the note from under his chair. His hand closed over hers, which she immediately opened with a red flush. He unrolled the crumpled ball of paper and read:

"Grand Hotel, Scarborough.

"DEAR MRS. LAURISTON,

"Thames Lawn, Richmond. I hope you and your husband won't forget me when you resume your charming evenings. There's nothing like them in town or out of it. I am constrained to beg to be remembered, for I know you have all the world at your feet, and I am but a humble unit. Always, as you know, very much at your service if I can ever be of use to you in any way,

"With kind regards, yours very truly,

"ARTHUR PASCOE."

"This is an answer, I see," said George when he had read to the end. "So you have been writing to Captain Pascoe."

"Only for his address, that we might invite him," said Nouna, looking frightened.

"But how could you write without knowing it?"

"He was going to change it, I knew. He is at Scarborough now."

George said no more, and tossed the letter into the waste-paper basket. Nouna, whose eagerness to change her shoes had disappeared, stood considering her husband, whose reticence she could not understand. She had braced her-

self up to meet a long interrogatory, and the simple silence made her think that something worse was in store for her.

"Haven't you anything more to say to me?" she asked at last, with her head on one side in a helpless, birdwitted manner.

"Yes, dear, I have a great deal more to say to you," burst out poor George, gliding from his chair down on to his knees before her, clasping his arms round her waist, and looking up into the beautiful mask of the spirit it was so hard to reach, so impossible to impress. "Why won't you be quite open and frank with me, when it's all I ask of you? When I tell you it hurts me so much for you to keep back a trifle from me that a whole evening's pretty caresses from you can't take out the sting of it? Can't you see, dearest, that nobody in the world loves you so much as I, or would do as much for you? Why do you encourage these fellows to think you can ever want services from them, when you know that the man in whose bosom you lie every night lives only in your life, and for your happiness? What do you want of me that I won't do? Why won't you open your little heart wide to me, as you do your arms? Don't you love me, Nouna? Don't you love me?"

His encircling arms trembled with the passion that surged in him, and the slender little form he held was swayed by the convulsive movement of his body. These appeals of her husband to something within her of which she had but a dim consciousness, bewildered and distressed a creature accustomed to live fully and happily in the day's emotions, beautifully unconscious of higher duties, higher claims. She was, however, moved to a soft sensation of pity for this big, kind, splendid companion whose passionate affection was, after all, the kingly crown of all her joys; and she put little tender arms round his neck in the belief that these mad frenzies after something intangible were signs of a disorder peculiar to man, of which that dangerous symptom jealousy was the chief feature.

"Of course I love you, George, my dear old beautiful darling elephant," she said, with the soothing accent of an affection which was indeed perfectly genuine.

And she kissed the waves of his hair with such a winning abandonment of herself to the pleasure his touch afforded her, and dropped down into his breast with such a seductive

air of meek submission to his will in every act and thought, that George was carried away from his doubts, away from his questionings, as he had been a hundred times before, and so she strengthened her empire over him in the interview which had at the outset appeared to threaten it.

It was not until he had left her, and was on his way to the church, that a momentary gloom fell on the glow into which the magic of her charm had cast him. She had been very sweet, but she had given no word of explanation of that strange request to Captain Pascoe, a man of a character so well known, that it was gall to George to think he had in his possession so much as a line of his wife's handwriting. With an effort he put the matter aside in his mind, not without the unpleasant reflection that, after all his efforts at art-education, the primitive and impracticable methods of the harem were those best calculated to keep the husband of the little dark-skinned enchantress in security.

A walk of a few minutes had brought him to the outside of the church where he was married, but he found the building a true type of Heaven in the difficulty of getting in. At last he ferreted out the person authorised to unlock the doors, and admit him to a sight of the register. It was with trembling fingers that he turned over the pages to find the signature he wanted. When at last he found the place, he bit his lip through in a first impulse of hot indignation. He had been tricked again by the whole gang, as he said to himself bitterly, within five minutes of his standing with his bride before the altar.

The signature of his wife was "Nouna Kilmorna."

CHAPTER XXII.

GEORGE LAURISTON hurried out of the church, and turned towards his home still in the heat of a first impulse of passionate anger against Madame di Valdestillas and Mr. Smith for inciting his wife to deceive him ; but as he walked and reason began to form a crust over the still flowing stream of passion, he resolved that he would not reproach his wife with this new concealment until he had accused her instigators, and learnt from them the meaning of it. With this decision fresh made, he forbore to enter his house until he should have recovered enough equanimity not to repel his wife by a fresh aspect of suspicion, and he was in the act of turning back within a few feet of the door, when a hansom drove up and Lord Florencecourt jumped out of it.

Catching sight of George, he paid the cabman, and came up to him with a face in which the younger man fancied he perceived less of constraint and more of the old frank friendliness than he had seen there since his marriage. In fact, the Colonel felt that the first of the barriers between them, that of concealment, was now broken down, and he began to breast his difficulties more manfully with the certainty that he was "in for it."

"I came down by the next train, George," he said simply; "I thought when that infernal black woman let out on me, we had better come to an understanding at once and have done with it."

"Much better, I should think, Lord Florencecourt," said Lauriston rather bitterly. "It would have been better if Nouna and I had been fairly dealt with from the first, and not forced to begin our life together in this smothering fog of mystery, deceived a little bit by everybody, and obliged to get every scrap of knowledge about our own circumstances by fighting for it."

The Colonel dug his stick into the ground and avoided meeting his eyes. "You have heard Sundran's story, I suppose?"

"Not yet."

"Well, well, it's not all my fault," said he. "An indiscretion involving a lady now, you know, er—moving in society—you see, one has not only oneself to consider."

His manner had suddenly become confused, incoherent, tentative, utterly unlike his usual soldierly abruptness. He seemed to be drawing back from his first open and friendly impulse, and to be more anxious for some exposition of his companion's sentiments than for an opportunity of expressing his own. George was quite ready to take up the challenge.

"An indiscretion, Colonel! It seems to have been a serious one. My wife signed her name at our wedding as Nouna Kilmorna."

The Colonel started, taken quite off his guard.

"The d——l she did!" After a pause, he added: "Then, by Jove, she must know—— Oh, these women, these women, there's no making a contract with them! They wriggle out of the terms of it like eels."

"You are speaking of her mother?"

"Yes, confound her!"

The veteran's philosophy, which he was fond of putting at the service of his friends, failed him at such a crisis as this, and left him at the mercy of the very commonest of all resources—interjectional expletives. But they did not serve the purpose of the simple explanation his hearer wanted.

"Things seem to point to a contract there is no wriggling out of," Lauriston suggested, as respectfully as the nature of the hint allowed.

The Colonel looked at George, and saw that he was at bay.

"Perhaps I had better have made a clean breast of it before," he admitted grimly; "only it's one of those deuced awkward things a man always shunts as long as he can. I did go through a form of marriage with the—the lady's mother."

"With Madame di Valdestillas?"

"Oh, ah, yes, with Madame di Valdestillas. Of course she—she wasn't Madame di Valdestillas then. She was a little half-bred Indian gipsy."

George looked cold. The light tone Lord Florencemore now seemed inclined to take, was not, all things considered, in the best taste.

"She was your wife, then?" he said.

The Colonel answered by a slight convulsion of the top vertebræ of his spine, to admit as little of the accusation as possible.

"Did you divorce her?" he asked, rather puzzled.

"Well, I don't know whether a divorce out there would be held quite regular over here. There's the difficulty, you see."

From which George gathered in a flash of astonishment that the austere and respectable viscount had, when the chain of his first matrimonial alliance grew irksome, troubled no court of law to regain his liberty.

"You understand," continued the Colonel, meeting his companion's eyes full for the first time, "that it is quite as much to the lady's interest as to mine that the affair should not become common gossip."

"To the mother's interest, perhaps, not to the daughter's," said George coldly.

"How does she suffer? She is received everywhere, made a fuss with, treated as a lion, as if she were descended from the skies. Would it improve her position for it to be known that her mother had been divorced, legally or illegally? What better provision could I, a poor man, make for her than I do, if she were my acknowledged legitimate daughter?"

"Provision!"

"Yes, I allow her a thousand a year, supposed to have been left her. Why not? She is under no obligation, and I——"

"—Will be relieved from the charge for the future. I guessed something of it this morning, of course, and was only anxious to know how much we owed you."

"Owed me! It is not a debt. I acknowledge, I am the first to acknowledge, the claims of my own child, especially now she is your wife."

"Oh, I acknowledge the claims too. It is only my pride that makes me waive them on behalf of my wife. Until I know all the circumstances of the case I prefer to stand independently."

"Why, what further circumstances do you want to know?"

"There are two more versions of the story I must hear before I can understand all its bearings. You understand, Colonel, that where a woman is concerned, the man's view of the question is not enough to judge by. I must hear Sundran and Madame di Valdestillas."

"Hear every hag in — if you please," said the Colonel irritably. "Only I warn you it is foolish behaviour rattling the bones of decently buried skeletons."

"If it were only an old scandal I shouldn't care," said George with a deepening of the collected gravity he had shown all through the conversation. "But you must see, Colonel, that the whole course of our lives depends on the following into its corners of this wretched story. My wife and I, starting quietly in a humdrum way, a pair of very poor town-mice, suddenly find ourselves in a Tom Tiddler's ground, and are bidden not to trouble ourselves how we came there, or why we are inundated with invitations, and our eccentricities treated as delightful innovations, when a few weeks before they would have been 'bad style.' It isn't in human nature not to ask why."

"Why can't you take my explanation and be satisfied?"

"Because it goes such a very little way. It explains why we receive one thousand a year, when we are getting and spending five thousand; why you treat Nouna with secret liberality, but not why you show her open dislike. Above all it explains your relation with Madame di Valdestillas, but not your objection to my seeing her."

The Colonel, who had been fidgeting uneasily with his cane, grew suddenly still.

"If you see her," he said slowly after a pause, "she'll consider the contract broken, and she'll ruin every man jack of us; and you and your wife may say good-bye to domestic felicity as well as I and mine. Be warned, George; you'd better leave things as they are, for both our sakes."

"I can't," said Lauriston, who felt that a chill had come upon spirits and senses at the Colonel's homely but forcible warning. "No man can blunder on like this in the dark and be satisfied. Whatever I find out, it sha'n't hurt you more than I can help, Colonel."

He added something about Nouna's waiting for him to take her out, anxious to get away. But the Colonel, who

seemed loth to part with him, turned back when they had shaken hands at his initiative, and said :—

“Madame di Valdestillas is abroad, is she not?”

“So I have been told. But in the mesh of lies they have entangled me with, I shouldn’t like to answer for the truth of it.”

“Look here, if you will leave this to me, I’ll write to her lawyers and arrange a meeting for you and me at the same time. And we’ll talk to her together.”

“Thanks, Colonel. But I can’t wait for that; and I’m not going to trust to the lawyers this time.”

“But if she is abroad?”

“If!”

This terse reply seemed to disconcert Lord Florencourt, who left him without further protest or comment, and made straight for the park. George went back to his own house and inquired if Sundran had returned. On learning that she had not, he went up stairs in search of his wife, but was told she had gone out soon after he himself left the house. Her husband was not to wait for her to dinner, as she had gone to see Mrs. Ellis and might stay to tea with her.

Though this freak was perfectly consistent with Nouna’s capricious character, George was just in the mood to regard the message with vague suspicions of some trick. However, as he did not know Mrs. Ellis’s address, he had no means of following her, and seeing that it was already nearly six o’clock, he started off at once for Mary Street. The door of No. 36 was opened by a young servant, apparently new to the place, who told him, in answer to his inquiries, that a black woman had come there that afternoon to see Mr. Rahas, adding that after staying a very short time she had gone away again in the cab which brought her, Mr. Rahas himself putting her in, giving the direction to the cabman, and at the last moment jumping in after her.

“I suppose you don’t remember what the direction was?”

The girl was a cockney, and scented backsheesh. She nodded with much shrewdness. George put his hand to his pocket.

“Waterloo station—side for Richmond,” she said promptly.

Richmond! George remembered the address given by Captain Pascoe in his note. It might be only a coincidence,

but a coincidence when one is on the track of a mystery becomes either a guiding or a misguiding light.

He asked, as he dropped a half-crown into the girl's hand, whether Mr. Rahas had returned home, but it was not with the intention of settling accounts with him then. On learning therefore that he had not come back yet, George simply went away and got as quickly as he could to Waterloo.

Thoughts of Lord Florencecourt, Madame di Valdestillas, and the haze of inconsequent romance which seemed to surround their conduct to their daughter faded before a fiery fear that this untamable sun-child to whom he had given all his heart had been led into some trap by Rahas ; for George suddenly remembered that, as he did not know Captain Pascoe's handwriting, the signature might have been merely a blind. Ridiculously unlikely as the supposition was, the unhappy young husband could think of no less fantastic explanation of the facts ; no reasoning could have dissolved his belief that it was to Thames Lawn, Richmond, that her sudden journey had been taken, and his only comfort was in knowing that he had followed her up so quickly that his arrival there could scarcely fail to be within less than an hour of hers.

At Richmond he darted out of the station and jumped into a fly.

"Thames Lawn. Drive as fast as you can," he said.

The driver, instead of starting, turned, after the manner of his kind, to debate.

"Thames Lawn !" he repeated, reflectively. "Don't know it, sir. Who lives there ?"

"I—I don't know the name of the people who have it now," said George.

He was on the point of jumping out of the fly to make inquiries in the station, when another driver joined in the discussion.

"Thames Lawn !" cried he, "why it's the place where they foreign swells live that gives the big parties. Prince and Princess Wesenstein. That's the place. Where you drove the young gent that give you half a sovereign."

"Oh—ah—yes," said the other, and touching his hat to his fare with a nod to signify that it was all right, he gathered up the reins and started.

A foreign prince and princess who gave big parties ! To even an intelligent Englishman the idea suggested by these

words was more consistent with his suspicions of some grave villainy than the mention of an English lady and gentleman would have been. Yet the munificent and showy hospitality implied in the brief description did not agree with his fears of an ambush. A drive through the narrow High Street, filled with the overflowing, lively crowd of a bright summer evening, brought him in a few minutes to the lodge-gates of Thames Lawn. George left his fly waiting outside, and made inquiries at the lodge. The Prince and Princess were at home, the lodge-keeper said, but there was no gentleman of the name of Rahas staying with them that he knew of. There were often gentlemen with foreign names staying there, as his highness himself was a foreign gentleman.

"Has he a very dark complexion?" asked George, with a new doubt in his mind.

"No, he's as fair as any Englishman, like most Germans," said the lodge-keeper, rather superciliously, with for the first time a suspicious expression in his dull British grey eyes. "There's a dark gentleman visiting there this afternoon," he added, after a few moments' consideration, during which he had carefully taken stock of his questioner, and perhaps satisfied himself that he was not "after the spoons."

"Oh, was he alone or with a lady?" asked George, with careful carelessness.

"Well, sir, he was with a walking bundle of white tea-cloths," said the lodge-keeper, rendered more sympathetic by the chance of airing his own humour.

"You are sure," said George, with a great heart-leap, "that the lady was dressed in white, and not in grey, with a grey cap?"

"No, sir: no lady in grey has been here to-day. I can count the ladies as comes here," he added, with just meaning enough to give the young husband an impulse of thankfulness that he had forestalled his wife.

He thanked the man and made his way through a winding avenue of lime and chestnut trees to a grass-plot studded with flower-beds and surrounded by a circular drive leading to a large, square-built brick house, which seemed to rise out of a bank of laurels and other shrubs lightened by clusters of rhododendrons. The portico was smothered with creepers, which were carefully trained to extend over the walls. Long trails of still green Virginia creeper swung backwards and forwards in the air above a thick mass of

geraniums of various colour that were banked up round the pillars of the entrance. The door was open, showing at the end of a wide hall a sloping lawn and a glimpse of the river. As George rang the bell, a gust of wind blew into his face the petals of overblown roses from stands of flowers that lined the hall, with perfumes of pungent sandal and sickly sweet exotics. A footman in a striking livery of purple and gold, whom the lowness of the roof of the hall magnified into a giant, appeared at once in answer to the bell, and without coming to be questioned, lifted a gorgeous crimson and silver curtain with heavy fringes that rustled as it was raised, and stood aside, inviting the visitor to enter.

George crossed the hall, with an involuntary thought, as he glanced up at the rich colours of the painted ceiling, and brushed close to a cluster of delicate flowers unknown to him, that shook fairy bells in the stirred air, of the vivid pleasure this luxurious extravagance of scents and hues would give to Nouna.

"I wish to see Mr. Rahas, who called here this afternoon," said George to the servant, pausing at the entrance of the room which, the first glance told him, confirmed the impression given by the hall.

"I will see, sir. I think Mr. Rahas is on the lawn," answered the man, still holding up the curtain in invitation to the visitor to pass under it.

After a second's hesitation George went in. The room was long and low, with French windows opening on to a verandah, from which the lawn ran down to the river. The walls were painted in eighteenth century fashion but in the nineteenth century spirit. Grey pools fringed with delicate bulrushes, astride on whose bent heads sat gauze-winged elves; a smooth summer sea with the phantom ship of Vanderdecken crossing the sun's path like a shred of mist; a siren asleep under the sea with a feathery pink sea-anemone for pillow, the sunlight shining down through the green water so that you looked and saw the baleful maid and looked again and lost her. All these pale fairy pictures, which emerged at intervals out of a fleecy background of cloud and tree, gave place as the eye travelled round the walls to deeper-hued representations of less ethereal romance. A golden-haired Guinevere, with blue unholy eyes and loose mouth red with kisses, looks lingeringly out of her window in the dawn to where among the grey trees of

the distance the gleam of a helmet makes a faint spark of silver light. A furnace-eyed, cynical Vivien, with passionate triumph fanning the glow of her swarthy evil beauty, glides up in the gathering darkness among overhanging cypresses from where, an undistinguishable heap, lies the insensible body of the conquered Merlin. A tiny brown-skinned, lithe-limbed Cleopatra, clad in chains of coins and little else, crouches submissive and seductive before Cæsar, raising long black eyes, twinkling with a thousand meanings, to the conqueror's face, while the black soldier-slave stands in the background, still holding the mattress in which he has brought his queen hidden, and casting furtive, fearful looks at the world-famous pair.

George shuddered : Cleopatra was like Nouna. He cast only a hasty glance at the other pictures, noting the last, a scene drawn from the most moving of modern romances, where Manon Lescaut, bewitching in her little frills and flounces of butterfly Parisian finery, descends upon young Des Grieux in his sombre Abbé's gown, and wins him, with smiles and tears and caresses, to her for ever.

These wall-paintings were all by well-known artists, and they stamped the room with a magnificent individuality. The mantelpiece was of white marble, carved by an eminent Italian sculptor, whose taste ran much to Cupids. The hangings of the room were pearl-white satin, and the furniture, in the slender eighteenth century style, was white wood covered with the same material. Tall white wood cabinets, also lined with the satin, filled the spaces right and left of the mantelpiece. Both were filled with old china, a Sybarite's collection, which contained no piece unique without being beautiful, or beautiful without being unique. Handsomely-bound books, of the kind which are written to be illustrated, lay on the tables among Venetian decanters and bowls of cut flowers. The floor was of polished wood, cool to the feet. In the verandah outside were low lounging chairs and a table with champagne-cup.

After a hasty survey of the room George walked to one of the windows. Mr. Rahas was in the garden, he thought, the servant had said. But there was no sign of him on the lawn or under the trees that bordered it on each side as far as the river's brink. As George looked out, and put one foot on the tessellated floor of the verandah to get a wider view, he heard a sound of a chair scraping the pavement,

and then his own name called. He turned round and saw Dicky Wood peeping up, flushed, amazed and excited, from under a Japanese umbrella which he was holding over himself as he lay in a hammock between two of the verandah pillars. In a moment George's eyes were opened as he noticed the free-and-easy manner in which the lad was enjoying himself, in a light suit, a cigar in his mouth his tie hanging loose, and observed the consternation on his face. It was the home of Chloris White, and Nouna, with her usual wild wilfulness, had stuck to her project of visiting this royalty of the half-world, and begging Chloris to relax her hold on Dicky. The coming of Rahas and Sundran remained unaccounted for; but George for the moment did not trouble about that; he was thanking Heaven it was no worse.

Such a great light of relief broke over his face that Dicky, who had tumbled out of the hammock in a shamefaced manner, and with as much celerity as if it had been his Colonel who confronted him, took courage to say :

"I—I didn't expect to see you here, Lauriston."

"I suppose not," said George shortly, with less moral indignation than irritation with this fool for being the cause of the horrible uneasiness to which he had been a prey. "I haven't much taste for the fruit that grows on the high road."

Dicky, who was not a philosophical admirer, grew red and angry.

"I won't hear a word against Chloris—I mean the Princess—even from you, Lauriston," he began, holding himself very erect.

George put his hand on the young fellow's shoulder. He was not two years older than the young scapegrace, but the prestige of his reserved character gave him authority.

"I didn't come here to quarrel with you, laddie," he said gravely. "When you find what did bring me, you won't be so loud. Tell me, why do you call her the 'Princess?' Who's the Prince?"

His thoughts ran again on Rahas.

Dicky glanced round the lawn.

"He isn't about now," he said carelessly. "He's a little dried-up German with dyed hair and moustache; seventy, if he's a day."

"Did you ever meet here a man named Rahas?"

"Rahas! Oh, yes. He's a sort of commission agent, who gets any Indian thing you want, from a pound of Assam tea to an elephant. Why, you know him, of course; for he lived in the same house with Mrs. Lauriston before you married her," rattled on Dicky, encouraged by George's lenity.

"Does he ever speak of her—my wife?"

"No, he won't. I began to chaff him once; only a harmless word or two," he went on hastily, seeing a change in his companion's face, "And he—well, he got all sorts of dark colours, and his eyes spat fire. I think he once went in for being a sort of rival, you know—at least, I mean before you knew her."

"Have you seen him to-day?"

"Yes, I think he's talking to Chl—the Princess—now somewhere. No, by Jove, here she is."

From where they were standing in the verandah they could hear the rustle of the silver fringe, and the tipity-tap of high-heeled shoes on the polished floor. She was a little woman, this famous personage, though it was only by comparison that you could discover the fact; for she bore herself with the easy dignity of a queen, and before he saw more of her than a golden head and a robe of buttercup silk peeping between draperies of black lace, he knew without debate that he had seen so much grace of movement in no English woman, and only in one who was not English. As she advanced through the long room in a very leisurely manner, a couple of spaniels playing about her feet, a painted fan in her hands, he found that he was waiting for her near approach with something stronger than curiosity. First his involuntary admiration of her carriage was changed suddenly, without warning or definite thought, into a sick disgust that grew, with the next few steps she took, into horror equally without cause, without explanation. Then his blood stood still, hot and fiery, in his veins, and seemed to be scorching his body, as the horror became in a moment a definite, devilish dread, so ghastly that the mind refused it as a thought, and the lips were paralysed and could give it no vent. When at last she reached the open window, and the mild evening light showed him her face without disguise, he saw nothing but the outline he had seen in silhouette against the window in his own house on the day he and Nouna entered it.

His own house ! Great heavens, no. This woman's house ; bought with the foul earnings of her infamous calling !

For Nouna's mother was Chloris White.

As he realised this, face to face with her, George reeled back against one of the supports of the verandah, and burst into a stupid idiot's laugh. The whole foundation on which heart and brain were busy building for a life's work and a life's happiness, had sunk beneath his feet and swept all into a hideous, yawning pit of ruin. And so for a moment the brain gave way and the horrible pain was dulled, while Chloris White, recognising her son-in-law with a shock, dismissed the enamoured Dicky on some futile errand, and gave all her attention to the unexpected and disastrously unwelcome visitor.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CHLORIS WHITE was one of those utterly corrupt, abandoned and dangerous women in whom certain noble and loveable qualities flourish with a rank and prolific luxuriance impossible in colder and better balanced natures. She had liked George Lauriston from the first, with the impulsive yet not altogether indiscriminating liking of a woman clever enough, while knowing the worse side of men thoroughly, to understand that there is a better and to work upon that also when it suited her purpose. When chance threw the young officer in her daughter's way, she spared no pains both by her own investigations and those of Rahas, in whom she found an agent ready to her hand—subtle, secretive, and not above bribes—to find out whether Lauriston as a son-in-law would satisfy her affection and her ambition for Nouna. Every report proved satisfactory; there was nothing against him but his poverty; and as Chloris White, at three-and-thirty still in the height of her vogue, helped herself with both hands to the savings of centuries and revelled in the spoils of city and county, there was no reason to make that an insuperable obstacle. For this half-bred Indian woman was born ambitious, and was determined that in her child should be fulfilled such aspirations as she had failed to realise in her own person.

The illegitimate daughter of an Indian Maharanee and an English government official, Lakshmi—for that was Chloris White's real name—had been born with the germs of marvellous beauty and ungovernable passions, both of which developed until at fifteen, when she became, by various artful ruses, the wife of a deeply-enamoured young officer, who was even at the time ashamed enough of his marriage to wed the little witch under an assumed name—

she was the most fascinating little fury in the Presidency. Though her husband had well-founded suspicions of her infidelity, she was clever enough to prevent his obtaining proofs of it, and at last, despairing of getting free in a more legal manner of this burden upon his life, a half savage wife, ignorant, vicious and violent, he left her when his regiment returned to England, leaving such provision as he, then a poor lieutenant, could afford for her and his child, a girl only a few weeks old, whose paternity he affected to doubt. Four years passed, during which he heard no more of either of them. The poor lieutenant became, by unexpected deaths, heir to a title ; he wanted to marry. Detectives, set to work both in England and in India, could find no trace either of mother or child. Finally, the husband decided that they must have gone down in the whirlpool, as such a woman would be most likely to do. He risked the venture and married. For years more no rumour of the lost wife troubled him, until, when he was Viscount Florencecourt, Colonel of his regiment, and father of two boys for whom he would have died, a horrible phantom rose, conjured up by a letter from the solicitors Messrs. Smith and Angelo, who made known to him that his wife, Lady Florencecourt, had arrived in England. He tried silence, denial ; but the wild Lakshmi had grown into a remarkably capable woman, and her lawyers were furnished with ample proofs that the lady now leading a notorious life in London and the little dare-devil imp whom the young lieutenant married seventeen years ago, were one and the same person. She had ferreted him out, hunted him down.

Lord Florencecourt submitted ; he would consent to anything, if she would only hold her peace. At first Lakshmi was merciful, contenting herself with a warning that his daughter had claims upon him to which he would have to give ear by and by. Then, having heard of Lady Florencecourt's pearls, Lakshmi demanded them for a wedding gift to his daughter. It was at this point that he saw Nouna by accident in the barrack-yard at Hounslow, and the fact was sprung upon him that this daughter of whom he was in vague dread was already the wife of his favourite officer. The next blows followed quickly : he must allow a thousand a year towards the support of the young couple, must cause his "exclusive" sister to call upon them, must induce Lady Florencecourt to receive them. The wretched man had

fulfilled every command, unable to console himself even with the reflection that these troubles were undeserved. At last, fearing that Lady Florencecourt's rudeness to Nouna, whom she suspected of being his daughter, would bring down upon them the last, worst punishment, he had to confess the whole story, and purchase her civility to young Mrs. Lauriston at the price of such a course of lectures, curtain and otherwise, as the mind of man recoils from considering.

For her husband Lakshmi had no mercy. He had treated her badly, the first and the last man who had ever had a chance of doing so, and the power she now held over him she used with the cruelty of a nature in its depths still savage still. But for this young fellow, who had treated her child with quixotic honour and delicacy which she, of all women, knew how to appreciate, she felt, when the awful discovery of her identity stunned him into momentary idiotcy in her presence, an impulse of pity and tenderness almost as strong as any she had ever felt for the daughter whom Chloris with all her faults adored. Lauriston's good looks also, his muscular figure and healthy, sun-browned face added considerably in her sensual eyes to the attraction his chivalrous character gave him. As he still leant back against the wooden support of the verandah, staring not at her but over her head in a struggle to get back his wits and realise the nature of the blow which had stunned him, Chloris White came forward and laid her hands winningly upon his shoulders with a pretty maternal air of compassion, which was the sincere expression of a kindly impulse tempered by an ever-present professional sense of the picturesque and moving. Her touch, the glance down at her face which it compelled him to give, brought remembrance back in a flood and filled him with loathing so overwhelming that he affected to stagger back inadvertently from the inadequate support on which he was leaning. Respect for women dies hard in men of decent lives, and George would not have had even this abandoned woman know the horror and disgust she excited in him. She had kept her child pure, he must remember that ; but all the stories he had heard of her unequalled rapacity and depravity rushed into his mind with the lightning rapidity of thought in moments of intense excitement, and gained a horribly fascinating force of likelihood as, by the light of all he

knew about her, he examined the face of Lord Florence-court's wife.

Chloris White was still at thirty-three a woman of surprising beauty, of small, lithe, youthful figure, and face far surpassing her daughter's in perfection of feature. But the daring process of changing her hair from raven black to a subdued golden tint had rendered necessary a change of complexion which gave a weird prominence to her long, black-fringed eyes, and helped to stamp the countenance with the unmistakable impress of evil. There was in her beauty none of the essential coldness of the English types, whose worst representatives lure for the most part at the outset by an appearance of straightforward innocence in the gaze of confiding blue or grey eyes. She was a glowing spark from the forge of Evil, burning, searing, daringly brilliant and unmistakable, whose allurements appealed directly to the viler side of men ; her attractions were the poisonous charms of stagnant waters and forest swamps, of venomous reptiles that hang or creep in sinuous curves where vegetation is rankest, where no breeze penetrates to disperse the fumes of damp and decay : her beauty was the beauty of corruption.

George Lauriston was not the man to remain long the prey of vain imaginings ; almost as soon as he recovered full use of his mind after the first stunning shock, he was entirely himself again, understanding that a contest between them was inevitable, and deciding as rapidly what were to be his chief weapons. His first impulse had been to avoid a discussion, by withdrawing at once without an explanation, resigning his commission, and emigrating with Nouna to the uttermost parts of the earth. But close upon this idea had followed the certainty that this spoilt creature, baffled in her ambition for her child, would use the means of compensating herself offered by her hold over the Colonel, and by proclaiming and proving herself to be the real Lady Florence-court, bring ruin to the family. Chloris also prepared herself for a struggle. She knew that the cynical philosophy which would quietly accept a daughter and a fortune from hands such as hers, was not to be found in company with the virtues for which she had chosen her son-in-law.

Therefore, with head bent like a penitent Magdalen, so meek that the harshest could not spurn her, she drew back

as it in shame, and addressed him in a low murmuring voice of an indescribably vibrating quality, sweet, deep-toned, and penetrating as the sound-waves of an organ through quiet aisles. The voice, like the face, shook George with an unspeakable horror. For in every glance, in every tone, he saw a sickening, awful likeness to the young wife he worshipped, and in the power this depraved woman exercised over half the fools of the day, his unhealthily excited fancy saw a hideous burlesque of the undue dominion Nouna had already got over him. He listened without looking at her at first, until the irresistibly melting tones made it impossible to forbear meeting her eyes in the searching demand to know whether the face would belie the words.

"You will not let me touch you, the husband of my own child. I do not blame you. I can even say I am sorry you have come, since to meet me has given you pain. I am not proud for myself, I am only proud for my child—my children. While I kept myself apart from you for your happiness, my soul, all that is best and truest in me, was with you. You are my judge, my son, but remember that."

Even the highflown speech was like Nouna in her serious moods. George glanced at her. Her eyes, to which the rest of her face, beautiful as it was, seemed in moments of excitement only a sort of unnoticed setting, were like liquid fire.

"I am no judge, madam," he said, "and I thank God for bringing me here to-day."

Her expression changed; evidently she had prepared herself for an outburst of anger, and was less able to cope with a masculine quietness.

"You are glad you came to-day?" she faltered, not knowing what this might portend, for her visitor gave no sign of working himself up to a good, warming height of indignation.

"Yes. You would have let me go on for months living like a skunk."

The Magdalen look gave place at once to a vindictive tightening of the lips and narrowing of the eyes.

"You are not satisfied with what I have done for you?"

"No, madam."

"Why, what would you have?"

"I would have had you let me know the truth. I deserved it."

"But you would have objected to my daughter's having the fortune which made her happy."

"If you knew I should object, you had the less right to deceive me."

He was not going to prate about his honour to this creature ; he did not even think she would understand him, but he was mistaken. Now that she saw what tone he was going to take she adjusted hers to meet him, and became cool and haughty.

"My daughter's nurse, Sundran, came to me to-day to tell me where to find the husband who deserted me when I was no more than a child ; she thought, poor woman, I did not know. I gathered that her recognition did not surprise you."

"Well, madam."

"Will it satisfy you to have your wife acknowledged as the Honourable Nouna Kilmorna, only daughter of Lord Florencecourt ?"

"No, madam. Nouna is my wife, that is enough for me. I only want you to understand that she must be content to live for a few years like a poor officer's wife, some day she shall have as much rank and position as she could wish."

"Oh, that would be charming for you ; but Nouna ! Do you think she is the sort of girl to be happy by herself in stuffy lodgings while you are amusing yourself 'getting on' ? Come, you know better. If she couldn't be contented like that during her honeymoon, do you think she could now ?"

The bitterness of this thrust, to which experience had given a barbed point, made him wince.

"She is only a child," said he ; "feeling my love about her day by day, she will learn to be happy in that, as you would have been if your husband had been all your heart wanted," he added, as a happy thought.

But Chloris White only laughed, having the coarse cynical honesty of her kind. "Do you really believe that ?" she said. "Well, you are wrong. In my case, because no one man could ever have been to me all my heart wanted ; in Nouna's case, because she is, disguise it what way you like, her mother's child. Give her jewels, new gowns, gaiety, luxury, and you may hold what room there is in her heart for a man ;

shut her in two rooms, restrict her to one frock for each of the seasons, and you will see, if you don't know, just how much happiness your love is able to give her. I tell you she must have pleasure, pleasure, pleasure ; and if you won't let her accept it openly, passing through your hands as a gift from you, I'll let her have it secretly through somebody else's."

A spirit of evil seemed to flash a hideous lightning across her handsome face as she uttered this threat. George was horrorstruck.

"You don't mean what you say," he said, catching his breath. "You, who were noble enough to keep apart from your child for her sake ! You would not destroy your own work now !"

"I would destroy anything when I'm worked up to it," she said coolly. "Listen, Mr. Lauriston. The world makes distinctions as to the ways in which money is made ; but it makes none as to the way in which it is spent ; that can and does confer nothing but honour. Well, that part of the business is all I ask of you. As to the way I get it, why many a man of your trade might think himself blessed if he got his with so clear a conscience. There are no villages burned to give me a cocked hat, nor towns plundered that I may build a villa. My money's my own, to do what I like with, and I choose to give it to my children to make them a position in the world. Nobody knows where it comes from, and nobody need know ; and you can call it your wife's money, not yours, if you are so particular. But she must and shall have it. Money is not made by looking at it by me more than by anybody else. I've worked for a fortune to give my daughter, because I mean her to have the best of everything in this world. I'm ready even never to see her except by a trick, but I won't have my work foiled just at the last by any squeamish folly on your part ; if you won't have wife and fortune together, you shall have neither, I swear."

"You don't seem to understand, madam, that your control over your daughter ceased when she became my wife."

"Did it ?" retorted Chloris White, with scornful emphasis. "Well, you can entertain that opinion, if it comforts you, for a few days longer. But don't depend too much on your legal rights when you are dealing with a person who lives outside the law."

"I can trust your love for Nouna to conquer any impulse you might have to do her harm through me," said George, a bull-dog defiance rising in him and affecting the tone in which he uttered these sufficiently pacific words.

"You can trust me to keep her from having her life ruined by any man's pig headedness," said Chloris, throwing herself into a long cane lounging chair with much spirit in voice and attitude. "Do you think I brought up Nouna virtuously to secure her happiness?" she asked mockingly. "No, I meant her to be happy in spite of it. I meant her to enjoy all the honours of the great world, and all the luxury of the other one; I meant her to become what she has become, a society pet, a society lion, by the very ways and manners which in me are Bohemian, shocking, impossible. Oh! They are easily gulled, those feather-brained ladies of the 'best' society. However, it is 'the best,' and so I mean my daughter to keep there."

"You don't understand these people," said George, disgusted by her shameless cynicism, but resolved to go through with the contest, and to make the best terms he could. "She has made friends among them now, real friends. When they hear she has lost her fortune they will simply try to make up for the loss by inviting her more, making more fuss with her than ever."

Chloris White shook her head contemptuously.

"Poor gentility," she said, "that depends on the broken dainties cast to it by its betters—for betters in money are betters in everything—is worse off than the frank poverty that lives on offal. Now poverty in any shape is loathsome, and it shall not come near my daughter. Fortune with honour is the best possible thing, but fortune without honour is the next best, infinitely better in Nouna's case than any amount of love in garrets. You see I am acting on principle. If you insist—and I see by your English bull-dog face you mean to insist (it is a trick of your country, and of no use with a woman) in refusing my daughter the fortune she is entitled to, I shall encourage the suit—the secret suit—of a lover who will be more compliant."

She took a cigarette-case from the table beside her, and striking a wax match on a tiny box that jingled among other objects from a *châtelaine* at her side, she lit a cigarette, and puffing a long spiral cloud into the air above her, watched it disperse and fade with much apparent interest.

To George she had become, in the course of the last few moments, no longer a beautiful, depraved human, creature with one fair spot in her nature that had to be touched, but a slimy noisome thing to be shaken off as quickly as possible and avoided for ever. He looked at her steadily, so steadily indeed that she turned her head on one side, and shot at him an oblique glance, in preference to bearing the full brunt of a gaze of such mortifying disgust and contempt. Then, bowing to her very coldly, he said he was afraid he had intruded upon her too long, and seeing a few steps off the open door by which he could pass through to the front of the house without re-entering the drawing-room, he was retreating towards it, when a voice in the hall struck upon the hearing both of him and of Chloris at the same time, causing her to start up from her lounging attitude with a bound of thirsty triumph, crushing all his cold armour of pride and laying bare in a moment the wounded passionate heart it had hidden.

He sprang forward, panting, feverish, imploring, like a weak boy at her mercy, held her wrists, looked down into her face with eyes that let light into the recesses of passion within him.

"For God's sake spare her, don't let her see you, Nouna—she has come to see Chloris White, the devil's part of you, about young Wood. Don't see her. Remember, she is your child and my wife. Show the angel's side once more. Be true to your own soul. Listen. You are your child's religion. While she worships you, while she holds you the ideal of all that is pure and lovely, the spirit of good in you is kept alive by her devotion. If you cast yourself down from that altar you kill in yourself everything that is not vile, base, devilish; you ruin the mind you and I have watched over and kept pure; you throw yourself and her into an endless hell. You are a woman—you will have pity."

He poured out these words in a hot lava-torrent of passionate emotion which surprised and moved the woman to whom sensations were the breath of life. However, she was not conquered; she looked up in his face and said with languid insolence :

"So! One can make fire out of wood at last! Well, you should have woke up sooner. I intend to see my daughter."

George heard the patter of Nouna's steps on the polished floor of the room within. With one rapid glance at the window, which was some few feet further down the verandah than the spot where he stood, and without one word or sound to warn her of his intention, he snatched Chloris up in his arms, and ran across the lawn towards the river in a slanting direction away from the window, to a spot where he saw a couple of boats moored to the bank. Utterly taken by surprise, and as instinctively submissive as her sex usually are to a masculine *coup* of this kind, Chloris White scarcely uttered a faint exclamation until, seeing the direction of their course, she asked, coolly :

"Are you going to drown me?"

"No. Though it's what you deserve," he panted briefly. And reaching the boats, he got into the nearest, a solidly built skiff, put Chloris down on the cushioned seat in the stern, pushed the boat off, and paddled her easily with the tide to the shadow of the trees, so that Nouna, if she came to the window, might not see them.

"What do you expect to gain by this astonishing stratagem?" asked Chloris.

"I intend to prevent you seeing Nouna until she has got clear of the house."

"In the meantime young Wood will have met her, she will have found out that Chloris White is at home, and will have made up her mind to wait until she does see me."

George made no answer. He was indeed considering what step he should next take. Luckily for him his silence, which was really the result of want of resource, impressed Chloris White differently. She was not used to being thwarted and treated as a person of small account, and she grew impatient and fretful at being made a fool of. To be forced to sit, with a complexion adapted for the half-light of the verandah and the lamps of the dinner table, in the full yellow glare of the evening sun, hatless, with no becoming sunshade to throw a soft shadow over her face, exposed without any of the clever artifices of her treasury to the disillusionised stare of the pleasure-crews that rowed past, was an ordeal which subdued the haughty security of this queen of an artificial realm more surely than innocent George could have guessed. She looked up at him, blinking in the unaccustomed strong daylight, with a malignant expression of spiteful hatred, and then looked over the

boat-side into the shallow water, cowering miserably before the combined forces of blunt, coarse, overmastering nature, and blunt, coarse, overmastering man.

"Well, you have got your way this once—make the most of it," she said bitterly. "Let me get back on the bank; the sun makes my head ache."

"You will let her go without seeing her?" said George, utterly unconscious in the earnest realities that were occupying him, of the frivolous details which had gained his victory, and suspicious of her good faith.

"Yes, yes, yes, I tell you. She can go and you can go—the sooner the better. I am worn out with your coarse violence; I must go to my room and lie down."

George paddled slowly back to where there was a path-way among the trees. An inkling of the truth broke upon him as he compared the superb disdain and contemptuous coolness with which this woman had treated him in the verandah with the broken-spirited petulance she showed now. He became rather ashamed of his stratagem, and helped the humbled woman to land very gently, with lowered eyes, feeling for the first time a spark of human kinship with her in this little exhibition of unamiable nature. "I am sorry if I have been rough," said he humbly. "You see I have been much disturbed to-day."

She made no answer, being by this time safe on the bank. She gave him—feeling more at ease already in the shade of the trees—one flashing, enigmatical glance which, while it did not betray her thoughts or her feelings towards him very definitely, yet renewed the impression of evil which her feminine helpless querulousness in the boat had for the time laid in abeyance; then she turned, and letting her golden-coloured gown trail after her on the narrow path, she walked away with the free motion from the hip, and graceful, alluring bearing which had come to her with her Eastern blood. But to George she looked, as she got further and further from his sight in the black and dim recesses of the plantation, like a huge, sinuous serpent, with head and upper part raised from the ground, ready to spring at and coil round its victim.

He remembered with a start that her word was not to be relied on, and bringing the boat with a few strokes back to where he had first found it, he jumped ashore, made fast the painter, and crossed the lawn rapidly to the window of

the drawing-room. Nouna was there alone, leaning over a low chair, utterly absorbed in the picture of Guinevere at the window. She turned round on hearing footsteps, and screamed at sight of her husband. He sprang across the floor to her ; but, struck suddenly with a terribly vivid sense of the likeness between her and the wretched woman he had just left, he felt his first impulse to take her in his arms freeze up, and merely said that she must come home with him. She cast a last lingering look of admiration at the paintings on the walls, and let her husband lead her out through the hall, where she tried to lag behind him with inquisitive glances into all the corners, burying her head among the hot-house flowers in a subdued ecstasy of enjoyment, and altogether showing a manifest reluctance to leave this strange little paradise of delights. They walked down the avenue in silence, except that he told her to make haste, and rebuked her rather sharply for a stealthy glance behind her at the house.

At the lodge-gates the fly in which he had come was waiting. When he had helped her in there came upon him a strong sense that he and she—an ill-assorted pair enough, with many a struggle and a heart-pang in store for them—were all that was left, each to the other, in a mass of tumbled ruins of fair prospects that had been solid and stately that morning. And as she cowered, very silent and subdued, expecting a scolding for her escapade, he put his arms round her, just before the sheltered road where they were driving joined the highway, and pressed a fervent, throbbing kiss on her lips. She returned it demonstratively, according to her wont, and then, as they were close upon the High Street, they had to calm down their exuberance, and he asked :

“What were you thinking about, Nounday?”

“I was thinking how lovely it would be to live in a house like that,” she answered *naïvely*.

It was natural enough, and George said so to himself, and would not let himself be tortured by the thought that the innocent remark was significant.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THROUGHOUT the journey back to town from Richmond there was, after that brief caress, scarcely more communication between George and his wife than if they had been strangers. Nouna, surprised in a flagrant act of disobedience, was disposed, by the very leniency with which she had been treated, to look upon her husband's reserve as ominous; while he on his own side was too much absorbed in considering what steps he ought next to take to dispel her fears of punishment by so much as a few gentle words.

The fact was that George, who, like other reserved people of strong feelings, could only control the expression of those feelings, when strongly excited, by mounting over himself the strictest guard, wore on this occasion an unconscious panoply of sternness which was far more alarming to the impressionable Nouna than the most passionate outpouring of invective could have been. As the hansom they had taken from Waterloo Station drove up to the door of their house, and George flung the doors open with a sudden impulsive movement forward as if he would have sprung out without waiting for the driver to pull up, he was recalled to a consciousness of his wife's presence by a frightened moan at his elbow, and looking round hastily, he saw her huddled up in the corner watching him with eyes full of fear. The sight startled him horribly, for the discovery of the evening had poisoned his mind with evil knowledge and rank suspicions.

"What is the matter? Why are you looking frightened?" he asked with a constrained look and tone which seemed to the frightened creature both fierce and harsh.

Nouna drew a long, shivering breath and did not answer,

her eyes moving with the helpless, agonised expression of a field-mouse imprisoned for a few moments in human hands. Not in the least understanding the effect his manner had upon her, Lauriston's suspicions suddenly took form as he remembered the presence of Rahas at Thames Lawn. As a matter of fact Nouna was entirely ignorant that either the Oriental merchant or Sundran was at the house she had just visited with the harmlessly quixotic intention of pleading for Dicky Wood. But Lauriston could not know that, could scarcely at that moment have believed his wife's oath if she had sworn the truth. He turned sharply round in his seat to get a full view of her face, and she, scared out of all self-control, uttered a little shriek. He did not touch her, he did not attempt to reassure her; with a heavy, hopeless sigh he turned away, took off his hat, and passed his hand over his forehead. They had reached home, the footman was advancing from the open door; George noticed with disgust that the man must have witnessed the little scene. He got out and held out his hand to his wife, who rejected it and hung back until he quietly gave place to the servant, and walked to meet the Colonel, the sight of whom on the pathway a short distance from the house, had been the cause of his start forward in the hansom.

As the two men met they exchanged eager, anxious glances.

"Well!" said the Colonel shortly.

Lauriston, who looked haggard, white, and shaken, waited for him to speak further.

"What has—she done?"

Unwilling so much as to mention the name of the woman he reluctantly acknowledged as his daughter, Lord Florence-court glanced towards the house she had just entered to indicate whom he meant.

"Done! What has she done? God knows."

"Well, what do you suspect? You can speak out to me; I am not sensitive now. Has she done—the worst? You looked at her as if you could have killed her. I saw as you passed."

Poor George stared at him in consternation.

"I looked—at my wife—as if I could have—killed her!" he repeated stupidly.

"Yes, by Jove, you did."

George said nothing more for a few moments, being

altogether shocked to learn that he could become unconsciously the most repulsive of tyrants to the very creature whom, in all the wreck of his life and his hopes, he unswervingly and with a new smarting fervour, adored.

"I suppose," he said at last, "I'm going off my head. I swear I hadn't the least idea there was anything unusual in my manner. Poor little thing!" he murmured abstractedly, while the Colonel continued to regard him very curiously.

George turned instinctively towards his home, and glanced through the trees at the windows of his wife's room with a great yearning in his whole face. The Colonel put his arm briskly through the young man's, and tried to lead him towards the nearest gate. They had wandered into Kensington Gardens.

"Come and dine with me at the Wellington Club. I've called twice at your place since I left you, and have been hovering about ever since on the look-out for you. Come—a glass of Rudesheimer——"

George drew back. "No, thanks, Colonel; I can't come to-night. I must go back to my wife. You see—leaving her like that——"

He stammered and stopped. The Colonel considered him again attentively.

"You've not been telling her anything of our talk this afternoon, have you?" he asked, with a shade of contempt. "I cannot understand that craze of a newly-married man to be babbling of all his affairs to his wife. I should as soon think of consulting a new hunter as to an investment in Consols."

"I have told her nothing."

"Then what is the matter with you? You look more upset than you did this afternoon."

"I have seen Nouna's mother."

The Colonel's jaw dropped, and his irritability suddenly disappeared.

"Madame di—di Valdestillas?" he said in a subdued, tentative tone.

"Oh, no; I've had my way. There's an end once for all to all humbug," answered George bitterly. "I've seen Chloris White."

Then both remained silent for a while. Truly after this there seemed little to be said. At last the Colonel said in a low voice :

"Now, my boy, you see what I've had to live through the last few years. You don't wonder any longer at my opinion of women?"

But George felt no sympathetic softening. He thought that a man should make sure of the death of his first wife before he married a second, and that he should show a little human feeling for his own daughter.

"I don't wonder either, Colonel, at Chloris White's opinion of men," he said drily.

"You think you have a grievance against me, I see."

"Frankly, I do. Why didn't you make a clean breast of it when you found it was I who had married your daughter? You might have trusted me, Colonel, as if I had had no tongue; you know that. And you saw me fall into a villainous trap and live on that infamous woman's money. O God! The thought of it! When just a whisper would have put me right."

"Well, well, the murder's out now, and one sees things differently. I knew what your wife's influence over you was, and I thought if I breathed a word it would get to her ears and set her clamouring for her pitiful title. A man's a weak thing in a beautiful woman's hands, as no one knows better than I. I'll do what I can for you; I'm bound to, and I will. What do you propose to do?"

"Resign my commission, give back every cursed penny I can, and get employment abroad to work off the rest."

Lord Florencourt looked up, startled.

"Resign your commission! You mustn't think of that. The worst's over now; it is I, not you, who have anything to fear from the devil. Give up your house, of course; I'll allow you five hundred, six hundred a year. You are quite free from any obligation, for I acknowledge your wife is my daughter, and her mother would force me in any case to contribute to her support. Do you see?"

"Quite. I accept your offer, Colonel, in this way. You shall allow Nouna five hundred a year until we have cleared off every farthing we have spent under a misapprehension. But for the future my wife and I will live on my earnings and what I have besides of my own."

"But why leave the army?"

"Cowardice, partly. I feel disgraced and beaten down, and I've lost heart for the old ambitions. And—I have other reasons. Over here there is a constant risk of Nouna's meeting——"

He hurried this last sentence, but stopped abruptly in the middle of it.

"You might exchange. Come now, that would solve all difficulties. Nobody would know the style you used to keep here, and you could make a fresh start quietly."

George considered the proposal for a few seconds, and then shook his head.

"Look here, Colonel, it's no use denying it; I'm broke—as surely as a man who's gone to the dogs on his own account; the only difference is that I've been thrown to 'em. There's an awfulness about the thing I've been made to do that has bowled me over—pride, self-respect, and all. I shall work round again all right, I've no doubt, but I can't set to it in England or in the army. Help me to get away as fast as I can; it's the greatest kindness you can do me."

He had made up his mind past gainsaying. The Colonel was deeply moved, self-reproach adding force to his compassion.

"If you won't be persuaded," he began slowly, "I suppose I must help you your own way. How would Paris suit you?"

"Any place would suit me where I could get anything to do. And Paris would be lively for Nouna," he added, half to himself.

The Colonel would have preferred that Nouna's name should be left out of the discussion. He continued: "A young American, a connection of Lady Millard's, who is engaged in a bank here called the 'London, New York, and Chicago,' was telling me at their place a few nights ago that the firm intend to start a branch establishment in Paris, for the use chiefly of the English and American colonies. They have an opening for a young man of good birth and address. It's a wretched thing, I know, for you," he went on with a change of voice, glancing again regretfully from head to foot of the handsome young soldier.

"Can you get it for me?" asked Lauriston, with a first sign of eagerness.

"I think so, but—the salary is miserable and——"

"What will they give?"

"Something like a hundred and twenty at the outside to begin with. It's starvation."

"Not a bit of it. It's more than my pay."

"Yes, but your wife!"

"My wife?" George's face broke with a ray of a smile. "She shall be all right. She is no more than a bird to keep; and we shall live very near the housetops, where she will be at home."

In fact, the idea of having her all to himself again sprang up a bright little fountain in desolation, unlooked for in his breast. The Colonel pulled his moustache. Nouna, he thought, was the sort of bird to make a very uncomfortable flapping against the bars of any but the most expensive of cages.

"When can I know whether they will give me the berth?" George asked.

"I almost think, from the manner in which they spoke, that what I should say about you would settle it. They are particular as to the stamp of man. You could hear in a week."

"How soon can I get away, Colonel?"

"As soon as you like; I'll see that it's all right."

"Thanks. I want to wind up all my affairs here quietly, and slip away at any moment when I have arranged for the payment of the debts we have incurred."

"You can make me security for those. And, by the by, I can give you some good introductions in Paris."

"Many thanks, Colonel, but it would only be prolonging the social death-struggle. One can only die game to society on—the income we shall have."

"Don't you think, for your wife's sake, you are wrong in resolving to be so independent? How will you keep her amused?"

"Oh, that won't be difficult in Paris. The very air is more exhilarating than here, and she is just the person to appreciate its pleasures."

"But the pleasures ladies love are no cheaper there than here, remember."

Lauriston would not be cheated out of the rags of comfort he had collected for himself, and Lord Florencecourt was obliged to leave him without even discovering how small the income was to which the young fellow was trusting. The money he had inherited from his aunt—all he had to depend on besides what his own work could produce—brought him in only a little over a hundred a year; and he had even been obliged to encroach upon next year's income in the early days of his marriage, when it seemed easier to trust to the

literary work he had been promised for the future than to refuse his new-made wife the pretty trifles she set her heart upon. Now the idea of making money by writing again occurred to him, and pricked him to instant action with the thought that something might still be made of life if Nouna could only be induced to be happy in her changed circumstances. This was Lauriston's weak side. He knew that if Chloris White chose to be as bad as her word, and to excite Rahas's evil thirst for Nouna's beauty, he should have to enter into a conflict with a stealthy and unscrupulous enemy, the thought of whose underhand weapons filled him with fury and loathing. He must get away with his wife at once, as secretly as he could, trusting that the mother might overpower the fiend in Chloris, and induce her to leave her child safe in the care of a man whom she must at least respect. In the meantime the change in their circumstances must be made known to Nouna without delay.

George returned to the big house which was so detestably impregnated with the thought of Chloris and her vilely earned money, and inquiring for his wife, learnt that she was in her bath. This was with Nouna by no means the perfunctory daily ceremony of Europeans, but was a luxurious pleasure in which she spent many hours of the hot summer days, having had a room fitted up to recall, as far as possible, her dim half-imagined memories of the cool inner courts of an Indian palace. George knocked at the door and Nouna, recognising the tread, in a timid and uncertain voice bade him come in. The room was paved and wainscoted with tiles ; the bath, a large one six feet square, but only three deep, was sunk into the floor with two steps down into the water on all the sides, the whole being lined with sea-green tiles that gave a pretty tint to the water. A lamp hung in brass chains from the ceiling ; a long mirror reaching down to the ground occupied the middle of the wall. A sofa, a rug, a table with fruit and coffee, and a little window conservatory with thin lace curtains before it, were all the rest of the furniture. Nouna, in a blue and white cotton garment which was no great encumbrance, was peering up from the corner of the bath furthest from the door like a frightened water-nix. As George came over to her, she made straight for the opposite corner, and seeing that she did not mean to be approached nearer, he moved away from the bath and sat down on the sofa.

"I frightened you just now, I am afraid, Nouna," he began in a very humble voice.

"No-o," she answered, plucking up spirit as she saw she was safe from attack.

"I mean, perhaps you thought me cross and—and rough, because I didn't talk to you much on the way home."

"You were cross and rough."

"Well, I'm very sorry, for I didn't mean to be. I had had news which upset me and made me so wretched that I forgot everything else."

"What news?" she asked very softly, sliding through the water to the side of the bath nearest to him, and leaning her bare wet arms on the tiles of the floor. For she began, now that her fright was over, to see that he was unhappy.

He paused for a few moments to consider how he should best break it to her. At last it came out, however, with masculine bluntness.

"You know what you would say, Nouna, if you heard that there had been a mistake—about the money—supposed to be left us, and that we were as poor as ever again, and had to give up this house and everything—even your jewels!"

The water all round the poor child began to quiver with little widening ripples, as she trembled at the shock of this most dire calamity; even his previous suggestion of it seemed to have had no effect in softening the blow. As for George, he felt that all the previous horrors of the miserable day had produced no pang so acute as the one he now felt, when he had to deal with his own hands the blow which crushed, for the time at least, all the bright happiness of the only creature he loved in the world. He sat like a culprit, with hanging head and loosely clasped hands, too much afraid of breaking down himself to attempt to soften the gloomy picture by a word of hope. It was she who broke the silence first.

"My jewels! No, I sha'n't have to give those up," she whispered eagerly, "for they were given me by mamma!"

George looked at her with haggard eyes, noticing that the mere mention of her mother soothed her, let in a ray of sweet sunshine at once upon the black-looking prospect.

"But supposing we were so badly in debt that even they had to be sold!" he suggested in a hoarse voice that he tried in vain to clear.

"Then I should drown myself!" cried Nouna tragically, and she descended a step lower into the water as if to fulfil the dread purpose immediately.

"What, Nouna!" cried George, "don't you think me worth living for? Do you think, when I've lost everything else, you ought to take away just what would console me for it all? Do you, Nouna?"

She hung her head, and crawling, meek and ashamed like a truant dog, out of the water, laid herself face downwards on the tiled floor at a little distance from his feet. But when he stooped towards her she said, her voice ringing out with passionate sincerity :

"Don't touch me! Let me lie here till I'm good, and then you may pick me up and forgive me."

"But listen. I've something else to tell you, something that perhaps you will like to hear.

"What is it?" She raised her head and looked up at him.

"We shall be very poor, as I told you, and sha'n't be able to have a nice house, or many pretty things. But I'm going to take you to live in Paris——"

"Paris!" He had scarcely uttered the word when she repeated it like a shout of triumph, and springing up from the floor, snatched a lace-bordered and embroidered sheet which was lying on a little white porcelain stove in one corner of the room, and wrapping it round her with one dexterous sweeping movement, slipped off her bathing-dress like a loose skin from underneath it, and flinging herself on to the sofa beside her husband, put a transformed and glowing face up to his, as she whispered in a tone of rapture: "Then I don't mind anything—anything, for I shall see mamma!"

With an uncontrollable impulse George drew himself away from her and started to his feet. He felt sick, and a film gathered before his eyes, preventing him from finding the handle of the door, which he sought with cold, clammy fingers.

"George!" said a low voice behind him. He scarcely heard, scarcely recognised it, and made no answer.

"George!" A little hand found its way to his throat, and was laid against his neck.

His arms fell down listlessly, and as he stood still and felt that he was touched by clinging fingers, and heard Nouna's voice in its most caressing tones, his sight came

again; he looked down and put his hands on his wife's shoulder.

"Why are you going away, George? Why are you going away?"

"I don't feel well, dearest."

"Well, sit by me, and I will take your head in my lap and nurse you."

She led him gently back to the sofa. But presently, when she had curled herself up in a corner of it, and making him lie full length had pillowed his head upon her breast, and administered kisses and *eau de Cologne* alternately with great lavishness, she peered into his face with a new inspiration, and said mysteriously:

"You are not ill—you are unhappy."

He protested he was only grieving at the change in their fortunes for her sake.

Nouna laughed gently. "I was silly," she said, "and wicked. In the first moments of surprise one does not know what one says. I don't mind at all. I would rather be poor in Paris than rich in London."

He shivered, though Nouna, with some tact, believing he was jealous, had not mentioned her mother again. But she examined his face attentively, and saw that the drawn, hopeless look remained. After a few moments she slipped her shoulder away very tenderly from beneath his head, which she transferred to a cushion; and George heard the door softly shut after her as she went out. He called to her, but she took no notice, and he supposed she had gone to dress. But in a few minutes the ghost-like figure glided in again, looking just the same, and came to where he was now sitting upright on the sofa.

"There!" she said triumphantly, and she put her jewellery, piece by piece, down to a little gold bar brooch which he had given her before their marriage, into her husband's pockets. "You can go and sell them this minute if you like. You see I don't mind a bit. Not—a—bit," she repeated deliberately, and then looked into his face to see whether this willing act of self-sacrifice had brought him consolation.

George smiled at her and told her she was a good child; but his smile was still very sad, and the hand which he placed on her shoulder trembled. Then Nouna, who was sitting on the rug at his feet, began to cry quietly; their

usual mutual position was reversed ; it was she who now wanted to get nearer to him, and did not know how. A strange deadness seemed to have come over him, so that he did not notice even her tears. He was indeed arranging his plans for their departure from England, with some distrust of his wife's fortitude at the end. At last, when amazement at this singular state of affairs had dried her eyes, and she had sat mournfully staring at her husband in utter silence for some minutes, a light broke upon her face, and she sprang up suddenly into a kneeling position. Joining her hands together above his knees like a child and looking out instinctively at the glimpse of darkening sky visible between the leaves of the plants in her little window conservatory, she said with all the solemnity and timidity of a person who is undertaking for the first time an arduous responsibility :

“Pray God to comfort my husband George, if I cannot.”

This startled George and broke him up altogether, reserve and fortitude and manly dignity and all. He snatched her up in his arms with such impetuous haste that her slippers flew off and exposed little pink toes to the air, and enfolding her in a hug that went nigh to stopping her breath, burst into sobs like a hungry and beaten child.

CHAPTER XXV.

To George Lauriston's infinite surprise and comfort, his young wife, instead of dealing him fresh wounds in his misfortune by lamentations over their altered lot, fell quite naturally into the woman's part of helpmeet, and eased the wrench of breaking from his old career by an unwavering brightness and sweetness which woke in him the fairest hopes of what their life together might yet be. On the other hand, this sudden change from winsome wilfulness to still more winsome womanliness could not fail to rouse in him some anxiety as to its cause. Had she received any communication from her mother, either through the hateful Rahas or some other channel? Her secretive nature made it difficult to discover the truth on such points.

"Why are you so kind to me now, little woman?" he asked her two days after the memorable return from Norfolk, when their preparations for departure were already half made.

"Kind! Wasn't I always kind to you?" she asked, not quite evasively, yet with more understanding than she affected to have.

"Yes, but not quite in the same sweet way."

"Ah ha! It's the pictures and the music and the sermons you've taken me to beginning to have an effect at last," she said, not flippantly, for though she laughed her eyes began to glisten.

George was touched, but greatly puzzled.

"Have you heard anything from Sundran since she left?" asked he carelessly, after allowing an interval to elapse so that the question might appear to have no connection with what had gone before.

"No," said Nouna; then, after a pause, she looked up at her husband mysteriously. "Do you know what I think?"

“Well!”

“I believe she has managed, how I don’t know, to find her way back to mamma. I’ve been thinking it over a great deal, and I fancy when she found out the Colonel,”—(she lowered her voice)—“she thought she ought to let mamma know where to find him.” And Nouna finished with a slow emphatic nod of her small head.

“That’s a very clever suggestion,” said George, who indeed had reason to think so. He felt relieved, for Nouna’s want of candour had never gone the length of deliberately planned deceit, and he decided upon the strength of this short dialogue that she had heard nothing.

The real reason of his wife’s altered conduct was not likely to occur to him. Coming of a race which places the one sex in such complete subjection to the other that confidence between them is impossible, she possessed, together with that cautious over-reticence which is the weapon of the weak, its correlative virtue—a delicate tact which avoided a sensitive place discreetly, and made no attempt to lay bare a wound which her lord wished to conceal. Something had happened to make George unhappy—this kind husband who had cherished her so tenderly, who had denied her no proof of his affection. Her woman’s heart was deeply touched; if she had any curiosity it could wait for its satisfaction until by and by when he was better; in the meantime she would be loyally good to him, even to the extent of checking her secret sobs over the parting with the plants and perfumes and knick-knacks which had grown into her frivolity-loving heart.

George got the bank appointment, through the efforts of Lord Florencecourt, who told him he had had a close race with a connection of the man who was to be manager of the Paris branch.

“He’s a disagreeable man, the manager, Mr. Gurton,” said the Colonel. “I hope you’ll get on all right with him. The young fellow he wanted to get in is a lad he calls his nephew, but by all accounts he is what nephews have a trick of turning out to be. Gurton is rather savage over the disappointment; fortunately I was able to prove that the lad is not so steady as he might be.”

“Thank you, Colonel. It’s very good of you to take so much trouble. I’m sorry about the mysterious nephew. Unless he’s an exceptionally just man, it will make him so

ready to find fault with me. And of course I'm quite raw to the work."

"Oh, I don't think it's difficult—mere routine for the most part. My boy, it is a shame for you to be tied to such work."

"Well, all work is routine ; it can't be worse for that than the army. And then there are prizes. Who knows but I may end my days as a prosperous banker, with an income which would make a General's mouth water?"

Between the Colonel's hearty friendship and help on the one hand, and Nouna's unexpected and discreet sympathy on the other, Lauriston was beginning to realise that the worst stains of the degradation he had felt so keenly might in time be wiped out, and in this reaction he was inclined at first to lose remembrance of Chloris White's threats, and to look upon the smallness of his means as the present difficulty which would need the sternest grappling with. He could not bear the thought of plunging his wife straight from the unbridled extravagance and luxury which she had lately enjoyed with so keen a zest to an existence more meagre than that which had palled upon her so soon in the first days of their marriage. That she was preparing with great fortitude for such a plunge was proved to him the day before they started. She was rather silent and abstracted at dinner that evening, and when it was over she walked with a listless and melancholy tread into the quaint drawing-rooms, the shelves and brackets of which George found were bare of their load of fantastic trifles. Fans, screens, mirrors, ivory carvings, all had disappeared ; only half a dozen small porcelain vases, filled with fresh flowers that morning, remained.

"You've been packing up, I see, busy little woman," said George, trying to speak cheerfully, as he stood with his arm round her in the room which already began to wear a desolate look, as if the soul had died out of it.

"No, not packing, only making a list of them. Here it is. I thought they could pack them up themselves after we were gone" she said, sadly.

By "they" she indicated with a shudder the mysterious enemies who were driving forth her and her husband from their beautiful home, and forcing them to make horrid things called inventories of her little Turkish tables, and the soft sofas on which she had been so fond of resting, and the big oak

bookcase which was the pride of George's heart. She held out two or three half-sheets of her husband's foolscap paper, closely scribbled on both sides with her spidery, illegible writing.

"What's this?" asked George, running his eyes over it and reading aloud at random. "'One pair of pink garters with silver clasps, and with a little knob come off the clasp of one!'" He turned to the next page and read: "'Two fans with pearl handles and one with tortoiseshell which I have never used. Except once'" 'was screwed into the space above as an afterthought. George picked out another item. "'A hand-mirror that makes you look pretty, as if you had a crown on, for the top is a silver coronet.'" Further on the entries grew fuller and more eloquent, as if the very description of the beauty of her treasures had become a labour of love. "'Two lovely embroidered dresses, one pale blue silk, all over little silver birds with their little wings spread out as if they were flying in the sky. The other is pink with white roses and lilies, very nearly as pretty as the other one, and besides it is less worn.'" Even her velvet slippers, each pair described with loving minuteness, were faithfully put down.

"They are all there; I haven't kept back anything, indeed," explained Nouna in great haste, as George, after reading some *naïve* entries in silence, turned his back upon her, a proceeding which seemed to her ominous. "I've only kept just the things I had before we came here."

But then he put his arms round her quite suddenly, and held her close to him as he said:

"And who do you think will be able to get into those little doll's garments of yours if you leave them behind? The frocks might do for babies' gowns, certainly, and the red velvet slippers might be hung upside down for watch-pockets, but they will never find grown-up people small enough to wear them, my word for it!"

Nouna twisted her left shoulder up to her uneasily, and a little haughtily; she had considered the drawing up of this list as a very business-like proceeding, and now she was being laughed at for it. Her husband saw this in time to kiss away the gathering frown. His own taste would have preferred the sacrifice of the dainty though now most inappropriate wardrobe; but he knew that during long hours of the day he should have to be away from his wife, and as experi-

ence had taught him that she could find more entertainment in an embroidered sash than in the whole literature of the English language, and that moreover her moral qualities could shine out strongly upon occasion in spite of this unorthodox taste, he decided that she should have the solace in exile of all her private treasures except the jewels, which he intended to despatch to Chloris White at the moment of leaving England.

"You think I mind giving these things up!" Nouna said superbly. "But I am not a child; they are nothing to me."

Nevertheless, when her husband told her he would help her to pack them up, as they were of no use to any one but her, she leapt about the room for joy, and rushed off to take advantage of the permission in a state of frantic excitement.

They got away safely from England within a week of the fateful visit to "Thames Lawn," all difficulties being smoothed away by the co-operation of the Colonel who, while he made no effort to see his daughter again, did everything in his power to help her and her husband to get away quickly and quietly. They prided themselves on managing everything very neatly, and both men hoped that the young husband and wife would be able to get lost, not only to the world, but to the vicious and vindictive Chloris White, even without the adoption of a feigned name, which the Colonel advised, but which Lauriston declined to resort to.

"If they made up their minds to find me, Nouna's peculiar beauty would be clue enough to track me by to the end of the world," said he. "I have done nothing to disgrace my name, and it's one of my deepest wishes to make my wife so proud of it that she will forget that she ever had any other."

They started in the early morning from Charing Cross, Lord Florencecourt meeting them at the station to see them off. The greeting between father and daughter was a curious one. Nouna, whose prejudice against the Colonel had hitherto found vent in avoidance or in sauciness, now received him with a low bow and humble touch of the hand of decorous respect, while in her lowered eyes hatred of the man who had abandoned her mother struggled with her strong native sense of the majesty of a father. The Colonel's manner, on the other hand, was nervous and jerky. He was grieved to lose Lauriston, delighted to lose his daughter, and haunted

by a dread of what his demon-wife might take it into her head to do now she was foiled in her cherished ambition for her child. He had brought a beautiful basket of roses for Mrs. Lauriston, and he insisted on paying for their tickets himself, to save poor Nouna what he thought might be the shock of travelling second-class. When, as the train started, Nouna saw that, on shaking hands with her husband, the Colonel's eyes grew moist and kindly, she relented, and leaning far out of the carriage window, bestowed upon her amazed and unwilling father a kiss which, being justified only by that relationship which he was trying so hard to conceal, was scarcely less unwelcome than a charge of grapeshot.

The train was out of sight before he recovered a degree of serenity, which was shaken immediately afterwards by a glimpse he caught, as he was leaving the station, of a tall, lean man wearing a red fez, who came out by a different door, and crossing the inclosure in front with quick strides, was lost to his sight among the crowd in the Strand. Although George had not informed him of all he feared from Rahas, he had told him enough about this dark-skinned agent of Chloris White's to make the Colonel suspect that with all their care they had not succeeded in evading her evil vigilance. At first he thought he would warn George, but reflecting how common foreign headgear of all sorts is in London, he decided that he had not enough grounds for disturbing so soon the poor fellow's sense of security.

With their arrival in Paris began the third era in the married life of George and his wife. Nouna's delight in the bright city was so great that at first the fact of having to live in two small rooms on the fourth floor of a house in a narrow street off the Boulevard Poissonnière was of no account compared with the knowledge of the pleasures that lay outside, the walks along the lighted boulevards in the evening before the shops were shut, the expeditions in a tramcar to the Bois de Boulogne or Saint Cloud, above all the Sunday trips upon the Seine on a steamer, all joys within the reach of a most modest purse, were delirious excitements to her susceptible temperament, in the first ecstasy of which the handsome house at Kensington, the tropical plants, the supper parties, even the services of her servant Sundran, were for the time forgotten. On one memorable Sunday they indulged in a drive round the Bois in a *fiacre*, and in ices at the little *châlet* restaurant

opposite the cascade, where the lower middle-class brides come in all their bravery of white satin and long veil and orange-blossom wreath, looking coquettish, happy, and at ease in the unaccustomed attire which an English girl of the same class wears with such shamefaced awkwardness. To Nouna that day gave a glimpse of Paradise : the *fiacre* was more comfortable than her victoria in London had been, Hyde Park could not compare with the Bois, the passers-by amused, the ice intoxicated her. When the sunshine had faded into twilight, and they had driven back home through the lighted streets, she climbed up the long flights of stairs, still in a silent ecstasy, and sat down in a little low chair George had bought for her, seeing nothing in the gloom but moving carriages, and small trees growing thickly round a lake that glittered in sunshine, and pretty mock *châteaux* and a ridiculous little waterfall that fell from nothing into nowhere.

Presently she got up and went out on to the broad balcony which, encroaching upon the size of the rooms, was yet the chief charm of this little home under the roof. She had hung one corner of it with curtains, and George had contrived a canvas awning under which, when the weather was fine, she spent most of the hours of his absence. Her husband watched without following her as she leaned upon the rail and looked out at the yellow glow in the west which could still be seen behind the housetops. Suddenly she turned and came back to him. Standing just within the window with her back to the fading light, her face could not be seen ; but her voice rang out with a strange vibration as she called to him, holding her arms towards him :

“George, why don’t you come out to me ?”

He was with her in a moment, found her trembling and dry-lipped, and tried to persuade her to lie down while he called to the old woman from whom they rented the rooms, to prepare their supper. But Nouna shook her head, and insisted on his remaining with her by the window. Yes, she was tired, she admitted, but she wanted the air ; she would go out on the balcony again if he would go with her. As she seemed to desire it, he let her lead him out, all the time keeping her eyes fixed in a remarkable manner immovably on his face.

“Look out,” she said, “at the sky—at the houses—at all you can see.”

He let his gaze pass obediently from her face to the pale-starred sky, the grey-blue of which was merging into the last red rays of the disappearing sunset : to the house-roofs and chimney-pots, of which they had a good though not an extensive view, to the street below, with its little globes of yellow light, and the dark specks which were all he could see of the moving passengers. Then he turned to her curiously.

"Well, little one, I have looked at everything."

"And you see nothing—nothing strange at all?"

"There's a tabby cat two roofs off," said the prosaic male doubtfully.

"No, no," she interrupted impatiently, still without moving her eyes from his face. "Down below us—on the opposite side—a little to the left—in the black shade." Her voice had sunk gradually into a whisper. Then she stopped.

"Well, I see nothing."

"Not at the house where they have a floor shut up?"

George stepped forward and leaned over the rail of the balcony as she had done, Nouna following closely and clinging to his hand. On the opposite side, about three doors down, there was a flat on the third floor which had borne during the first days of their residence in Paris a large board inscribed '*A louer.*' George saw that the board was gone, and that one of the shutters was thrown back.

"Oh, I see they've let it. Well, there's nothing to be frightened about in that, my child."

"You don't notice anything else—anything strange—you don't see any—person?"

George started, and looked down again with searching eagerness along the line of dead-eyed shuttered windows.

"No, child, there is nobody."

Nouna heaved a long sigh, and looked timidly down through her husband's arm.

"No, it's—gone," she whispered.

"What is gone, dear? Tell me what you saw," said George caressingly, as he drew her back into the little sitting-room, where a lamp now shed its soft light over the white table-cloth, and Madame Barbier, who adored the picturesque young English couple, was arranging the supper in a dainty and appetising fashion.

Nouna rubbed her eyes, and clinging to her husband's arm, let the words of her recital drop from her lips in a slow, hesitating and faltering manner, as if she were fast asleep, and her brain were working sluggishly under the half-paralysing influence of a will stronger than her own.

"I was sitting in here," she said, "and thinking of all the happiness we have had to-day—the soft air and the warm sun, and your kind eyes upon me, and all the lovely things we saw—the beautiful ladies and the shining water, and the lights among the trees in the Champ Elysées when we came back. And all at once," her hands tightened their hold upon his sleeve, "I felt that I must get up and go out—there upon the balcony; and I looked out at the sky right in front where it was yellow like flame, and all the pretty pictures of the day I saw quite plainly still in my mind. But then—I don't know how—I felt my eyes drawn down from the bright sky, and there down below me—to the left, I saw all black gloom, and in it I seemed to see Rahas' room in Mary Street, with all the pretty toys and bright shawls about just as he used to put them for me to look at. And in the middle Rahas himself, only not kind and gentle as he used to be, but with a wicked cruel face, and burning eyes that frightened me. And I felt afraid, as if I could have screamed. It seemed so strange, for even when he used to look fierce, as he did sometimes, I never minded, and I was never frightened. Was it a dream, George, that I saw? And if it was only a dream, why was I afraid?"

Chiming in so appropriately with his own fears, this vision or fancy of Nouna's disturbed George a little. He calmed her excitement as well as he could, and found some comfort in the fact that the crafty Oriental had appeared to her, not as the kindly friend he had always professed to be, but as a person inspiring horror. This seemed the more remarkable as George had never mentioned the name of Rahas to his wife since their wedding-day; he came, after a little reflection, to look upon the vision as a proof of the new sympathy which Nouna began to show with his own feelings, and to rejoice in the fact that as the bond between him and his wife grew stronger under the influence of his patient tenderness, the power of any enemy to disturb their happiness was proportionately lessened. This home peace, which was attaching Lauriston to his young wife more strongly every day, was the more grateful to him, as his duties at the Bank were

rendered as irksome as possible to him through the prejudice of his chief, Mr. Gurton, who never forgave the rejection of his own candidate for the junior clerk's post, and who scarcely concealed his wish to find against him some lawful ground of dissatisfaction. This George was careful not to give.

Mr. Gurton was one of those disagreeable brutes who seem to be created as foils to show up the amiability and sweetness of ordinary humanity. He was offensive to his few friends; he was unendurable to the far greater number of people whom nothing but necessity threw in his way. But as a man of business he was clear-headed, shrewd, and enterprising, so exact and penetrating that even if he drank, as his many detractors alleged, there seemed to be no particular reason why he should not, as his business faculties could not be said to be less keen at one time than at another. He hated Lauriston from the first, bullied him on the smallest or on no occasion, and did all in his power to induce the young fellow to throw up his appointment. George took soft words and sour with dogged quietness, and applied himself with all the energy of his character to mastering every detail connected with his new profession, as serenely as if incivility had been his daily bread for years. As a matter of fact, the discourtesy and fault-finding of his chief did not trouble him much; he looked upon Gurton, not without reason, as an ill-bred brute whom one could only turn to account by noting the methods by which he had attained such a splendid dexterity in the management of affairs, and by thus considering him in the light of a noisy machine it was easy to take the sting out of his insults. At the same time this constant friction or avoidance of friction in his business life made home and wife doubly dear and sweet to him.

On the day following Nouna's strange vision on the balcony, he came home at the usual time, and asked her whether she had had any more "waking dreams." She answered, reluctantly and shyly, that she had not been on the balcony at all that day. George laughed at her, and told her she should go with him, as the presence of such a coarse creature as a man was a sure preventive of visions. She allowed him to lead her out, being quite brave with the combined forces of husband and sunlight. When they got on the balcony, however, and looked to the left at the house

where Nouna had fancied she saw Rahas, a sight met their eyes which, whether a coincidence or not, was strange enough to deepen the unpleasant impression of the evening before.

For the shutters of the uninhabited third floor were now thrown back, and outside the balcony hung a long strip of white calico with this inscription in broad blue letters: "Bazar Oriental."

George and Nouna read the words, and looked at each other in troubled amazement.

"I'll have this cleared up to-night," thought George to himself.

CHAPTER XXVI.

WHEN, true to his determination, George Lauriston visited the new establishment that evening and insisted on seeing the proprietor, an explanation offered itself which robbed Nouna's vision of most of the mystery attaching to it. For a dapper little Frenchman, who tried to live up to his obviously assumed business title of Ben Hassan by wearing a scarlet fez and a pair of Turkish slippers, immediately appeared behind the servant who opened the door, and announcing himself with a flourishing bow as the proprietor, thrust into Lauriston's hand a business card, and begged him to inspect his stock, adding that perhaps Monsieur would do him the honour to inaugurate his business and bring him good luck by purchasing some trifle. George consented. The Oriental bazaar consisted of three rooms fitted up with trestles on which were placed trays full of trumpery, gilt sequin necklaces, cheap scarves, and other so-called Eastern wares, such as may be bought for a very small sum in the smaller shops along the Rue de Rivoli. George bought a little feather hand-screen, obviously an "article de Paris," and returned to his wife quite satisfied that it was the sight of Monsieur Ben Hassan's red fez at one of the windows which had conjured up in her excited imagination the ground-floor in Mary Street and its younger occupant.

In order to convince his wife of her mistake, George took her next day to the establishment of Monsieur Ben Hassan, and was pleased to find that the nervous fear which had haunted her since her supposed vision faded away in the amusement of turning over the cheap trinkets and toys around her, as the obsequious proprietor, an active and voluble little Parisian, who would have been invaluable as a showman at a country fair, encouraged her to do. George

asked him, to satisfy Nouna, whether he had not had a friend with him on the balcony two evenings before, a foreign gentleman, in whom, he said, he thought he recognised an old acquaintance. Ben Hassan said No, he had been working by himself to prepare his "Bazaar" for opening on the following day, and he had been alone except for the occasional assistance of the servant. He admitted also, with a charmingly candid shrug of the shoulders, that his name of Ben Hassan was assumed, that in private life he was simply Jules Dubois, and that there was no gentleman in the business who came from further East than the Faubourg Saint Antoine.

Nouna, to tell the truth, hardly listened to this explanation. She was at heart still so much a child as to find, in trying on Tunisian earrings at a franc and a half a pair, and gold crescent brooches that could not be warranted to retain their colour a second time of wearing, as much pleasure as she had felt, a few weeks back, in decking herself with her wedding diamonds. Noticing this, the artful Ben Hassan informed the lady that he expected, in the course of a few days, a consignment of Indian jewellery which would be well worthy of Madame's attention, as it was the most marvellously cheap and beautiful assortment that had ever been seen in France. Nouna's face glowed with interest, which was repressed for the moment by her husband, who said coldly that Madame did not wear imitation jewellery; a statement which seemed calculated to be received with doubt, as Madame, now hung from head to foot with gilt chains and spangled handkerchiefs, was evidently very well satisfied with herself. However, the tactful Parisian bowed low and apologised, humbly observing that the wares in question were continually mounted, by desire of well-known ladies of the Boulevard Saint Germain, with real gems of the highest value. Nouna divested herself of the trinkets with manifest regret, and was with difficulty persuaded by her husband to buy a string of sandalwood beads instead of the barbaric rows of eye-dazzling brass on which her choice had first fallen. George was rather shocked; a taste for cheap finery in his wife seemed quite a new and startling development. As soon as they got on the stairs outside he said, in a low and puzzled voice:

"You wouldn't really care to have those gimcrack things, would you, Nouna?"

She wanted to sit down on the stairs and take the paper off her beads: stopping in the act, she looked up at him with a laugh, but yet showing a gleam of serious meaning in her red-brown eyes.

"Why not, if I can't have real ones?" she said with a note of pathos in her voice. "If I had rich things I should sell them to give you money. But these poor ones I can keep and do you no harm."

And George had a lump in his throat, as he often had now at innocent speeches like this from his wife, which showed the dawnings of a new womanly sympathy with him side by side with the old childish love of finery and glitter.

She showed, by certain impulsive remarks in the course of the next few days, a deep interest in the "marvellously cheap and beautiful assortment of Indian jewellery," of which the sham Arabian had spoken; and when, towards the end of the week, Monsieur Ben Hassan called one evening, not, as he assured the young Englishman, with the intention of persuading him to buy the mock gems which he had been informed Madame did not wear, but merely to justify in the eyes of Monsieur the praises which he had lavished on his own wares, Nouna showed so much eagerness to see them that George had not the heart to deny her the pleasure. Ben Hassan proceeded, by the light of the lamp which stood on the table amidst the remnants of the dessert, to unfasten a little flat box which he carried, to take out a layer of cotton-wool, and to display, against the velvet lining, rows of flashing white gems which caused Nouna to cry out with irrepressible admiration and longing.

"I flatter myself," said the Parisian, laying the box on the table and retreating a few paces with a bow, as if trusting his wares to speak for themselves, "that there is not another firm in France which can produce such a class of jewel for the same price."

"Yes, yes," said George hastily, with a shrewd guess that to see these sparkling ornaments hidden away again in the little box and carried off without leaving her so much as a single gem to remember them by, would break Nouna's heart. "But they are only sham jewels, Monsieur Ben Hassan, and a lady who has had diamonds of her own could not condescend to wear these."

Nouna, who was leaning over the table, fingering the

ornaments delicately, and considering them with the intelligent interest of a connoisseur, glanced up at her husband with a twinkle of demure humour in her eyes, and instantly returned to her amusement with condescension so infinite that it was not to be distinguished from the most extravagant admiration. The astute Ben Hassan saw the look, and bowed again with great humility.

"Monsieur, it is true an imitation is but a poor thing when you know it is an imitation," he said with shoulders raised and hands outstretched in modest pleading. "But I appeal to Madame, who is evidently a judge, if she would have known these stones from real ones?"

Nouna hesitated, then quietly picked out a pair of diamond solitaire earrings, and held them out under the lamp in her little pink palm.

"I should not have known these from real ones," she said doubtfully, and she looked up with an inquiring glance into the Parisian's face.

Ben Hassan drew himself up with much satisfaction.

"You hear, Monsieur," he said proudly, "Madame would not have known these earrings from real diamonds, and the cost of the pair is only ten francs!"

"Ten francs!" echoed Nouna with incredulous delight.

And as she turned to her husband with a low murmur, "Oh, George!" the paymaster saw that he was doomed. Without further show of resistance he paid the ten francs, and signed to the bowing, smirking Ben Hassan to pack up his traps and take himself off, which the Parisian did, departing with a torrent of high-flown thanks for their patronage and with every appearance of being highly satisfied with the transaction. So contented did he seem indeed, that so soon as the door closed behind him, and Nouna rushed into the bedroom to try on her purchase, George instinctively took stock of all the portable property which had been within the lively Ben Hassan's reach, to make sure that his ostensible occupation had not been a cover for a predatory one. He had scarcely reassured himself on this point when Nouna rushed in like a radiant little fire-fly, her new ornaments twinkling in her ears, her eyes dancing with mysterious excitement, her dress changed from a simple muslin to a ball-dress of yellow gauzy material in honour of her brilliant bargain. She flitted up to him almost breathlessly, and pulled his head down to her level

that she might whisper into his ear a communication which appeared to be of vital importance.

"Do you think," she suggested solemnly, "that he could have made a mistake, and that they are *real*?"

George laughed, and said No, he did not think it at all likely, whereupon she was silent for a little while, and then began again in the same tone, but with much hesitation.

"You know, George, he told me that day we went to his bazaar that he had some real diamonds in his stock, and said that, that——."

"Well, that what?" asked her husband, keeping his voice at a gently subdued pitch, with a intuitive feeling that a confession was coming.

"That if I would call in—some dy—bay myself—he would show them to me."

"By yourself!" cried George, all his blood on fire in a moment.

Nouna seemed at once to become a mere terror-struck heap, and her husband saw his fatal mistake.

"Did you go? Did you ever go?" he asked in the softest tones he could produce." But for a few minutes she was too much frightened even to speak, except for a muttered, "No, no, no," as she shook and shivered. When at last by patient gentleness he had mastered her fear, he extracted from her, little by little, the avowal that she had met Ben Hassan one day outside the door of the house where he lived as she was returning home from her marketing, and that he had persuaded her to go up stairs and see some diamonds he had just received. At the door, however, Nouna declared that she had been frightened by hearing another man's voice inside, and had refused to go in, and that Ben Hassan had brought out some earrings to show her, and had declared that if she would like to take a pair he would be satisfied with only a small payment to start with, and she could pay off the rest in instalments at her convenience.

"But I was frightened, and would not, and I tossed his hand up with the diamonds, and they fell on the floor and on the stairs, and I ran down and left him, and have never seen him since until this evening," finished Nouna, hurrying to the end of her confession. "And I know it was wrong to go up, but I didn't go in. And now I have done all I could by telling you everything. And you can

take the earrings back if you like, only don't be angry with me, because I can't bear it."

She burst out crying hysterically, and it was some time before she was calm enough for her husband to be able to ask her one more question. Did she know the voice of the man she heard talking inside the bazaar? At first she professed she did not, but presently she acknowledged, when asked whether it was like the voice of Rahas, that she thought it was. Then George was very sweet to her, and said she mustn't trouble herself any more about the matter, that she was a very good dear girl to tell him everything, and that it would have been better still if she had told him at first; that she must give up the earrings, as it was evident the man was a treacherous beast who might get them into trouble. He added that she was tired, and must go to bed, and fall asleep as fast as she could, and dream of the real jewels she should have some day if she continued to be the sweet and good little wife she now was. And so, amidst tears from the wife and consoling kisses, the little shining ear-studs were taken out, and George having become by this time a promising lady's maid, brushed out her curls for her, and tucked her up in bed, as composedly as if nothing in the world had happened to disturb the calm course of their daily life.

But no sooner was his wife thus disposed of than George, saying he must write a letter and take it to the post, went out of the bedroom, closed the door, and after waiting just long enough, as he thought, to make Nouna think, if she was listening, that he had written a letter, he went out and down the stairs. But Nouna had too much native subtlety herself to be easily tricked. As soon as she heard the outer door of the flat close, she leapt out of bed, muffled herself up in a wrapper, and stepped out on to the balcony. She could see that there were lights in the rooms occupied by the Oriental Bazaar, and that the shadows of men passed and repassed quickly on the inner side of the striped blinds. Leaning over the iron railing, she watched in much excitement for her husband's appearance in the street below. In a very few minutes she heard the wicket-gate in the *porte cochère* open, saw George cross the street, and enter the house where Ben Hassan was established. She could have cried out to him from where she stood, frozen by a great terror lest these men, whom he had gone to punish, should

be too strong for him and should do him harm. But then, would they dare, would they be able, even if they dared, to hurt him, the king of men? Little by little the seed sown by patient kindness, by conscientious effort, was moving in the earth and beginning to show itself alive. George was not now merely the handsomest, straightest, gentlest of voice among the men she knew, he was also the one person who never did wrong, who if he was angry proved in the end to have what she acknowledged to be a just cause at the bottom of his anger, whose rather surprising notions of what one ought and ought not to do were at least simple when one came to know him well; and whose opinion was now beginning to have so much weight with her that this evening it had even urged her in the strangest way to break through her habits and make an uncomfortable confession of her own accord. So she reasoned, arguing with herself as he crossed the road whether or not she should try from the height of the fourth floor to attract his attention. It would not be difficult, she felt. The influence she was secure in possessing over him would make him stop and look up at a call of her voice such as would scarcely be heard by the neighbours in the adjoining flats. Suddenly she drew herself erect, a thrill of passionate pride vibrating through her heart, and she laughed aloud and stretched her little hands to the dark sky.

"He does not need my help, for he is one of God's own sons," she whispered, and looking up steadily into the eye of night she waited, with heart beating violently, but with head erect in valiant confidence.

He had to get up those long flights of stairs, but he would not be long, she knew. She counted the steps he would take, picturing him with grave, earnest face, wearing that look which, when she had done something of which he disapproved, made her want to slide along against the wall with her head turned away from him. The *entresol*, first floor, second floor; surely by this time he must be at the third. She clenched her fingers till the nails made red marks in her soft palms, and strained her eyes in keen staring at the striped blinds. The moving shadows behind them had disappeared. Ben Hassan and Rahas—if it was he—had gone to the door when the sharp ring came at the bell. Nouna held her breath. Surely, surely, she heard sounds from the rooms; yes, yes, a noise of something

overturned, and then the lights were put out. The moment after, one of the widows was burst open with a crash, and two people, whose figures she could only see dimly in the darkness, sprang quickly, the one after the other, out on to the balcony, climbed over on to that of the next house, and disappeared through one of the windows. Then there was silence for a time which seemed long to her, and she saw a dim light reappear in the windows of the Oriental Bazaar. She guessed that it was her husband, searching; in a few minutes the light moved, and disappeared. She watched until she saw him reappear in the street below, then she went back into her room, and crept into bed again. When he came softly into the room, holding a candle he had lit in the next room, he crept up to the bedside and shaded the flame to look at her. As he did so, her face quivered, and he touched her forehead lightly with his fingers. The muscles of her mouth instinctively relaxed, and by the thrill that ran through her frame and communicated itself to his he knew that she was awake.

"You are cold, dearest," he whispered.

She sprang up, wide awake, full of life and love, with the bright blood rushing up into her cheeks, and tender, passion-dark eyes.

"No, no, not now, not now," she cried incoherently, as she threw her arms about him. "I was cold when I thought you were going to face those wicked men, all through my foolishness. But now you are safe I am warm, warm, and listen, George, I am always going to be good and tell you everything, so that you may never get into danger through me any more."

But George was frightened, for her feet were cold as marble, and her lips hot and parched, and he sat up a long time beside her, afraid lest her imprudence should have brought on a fever. Next morning she insisted against his will on getting up. She did not feel well and was very fanciful, astonishing him by the announcement that she wanted to go to church. The day being Sunday, the Oriental Bazaar was closed, and there was nothing for George to do but to gratify her desire. He wished, as in duty bound, to take her to the English church; but Nouna was not particular to a creed, and she had set her heart on going to the Madeleine. So, with some scruples of conscience, he took her to High Mass; and as she remained

perfectly quiet and attentive during the entire service, he comforted himself with the reflection that, as what he had been taught to call the "errors of Rome" were matters of the deepest ignorance and indifference to her, it was hardly an ethical mistake to let her see religion in an attractive light. When they came out he asked her rather curiously what she thought of it.

"Oh, I liked it very, very much ; I shouldn't mind going to church there every day," she answered with enthusiasm.

"Why," said George, "the service isn't much more beautiful than that at St. ———'s," and he named an English ritualistic church to which he had twice taken her in London.

"There is a difference," she said thoughtfully

"Well, what is it ?"

Nouna considered a moment. "You know those friends of yours that you took me to see acting in a piece at Saint George's Hall ?"

"Yes ; well ?"

"And then I saw the same piece acted at the Court Theatre just before we left London ?"

"Yes."

"Well, the difference is just like that."

George laughed. "I've heard people say something like that before, Nouna."

"Isn't it right, then ?"

"I don't know, dear."

"George, may I be a Roman Catholic if I like ?"

"No, Nouna."

"Why not ?"

"You mustn't choose a religion in a hurry, any more than you may a husband. In both cases, one ought to be enough for a lifetime ; and if you once begin to change your mind about either, you never know when to stop."

"But I had my choice of a husband, and I didn't of a religion ; I had to take what was given me."

"You would never do for a Catholic, Nouna. They have to confess all their sins, even very little ones that you think nothing of."

"Well, that's what you're always wanting me to do."

"See then. You shall go to Mass every Sunday and

then confess your sins to me, and you will be the very best of Catholics."

"But, George, George," she began, almost in a whisper, holding his arm tighter, and looking away over the Place de la Concorde, which they were now crossing, to the trees of the Tuileries, "there are some things—not sins—that one doesn't—like—to tell—I don't know why—but they make one think of so many things—that all seem new—and make one feel—like a different person. I suppose a man—never feels like that, but I'm a woman—quite a woman—now, George."

They walked on without speaking after that, till they got among the trees; then both stopped and looked at each other—shy, for that little whispered suggestion made each appear to the other in a new and sanctified light. The influence of the solemn and impressive Church rites was upon them still, and the bright sun was playing upon their earnest faces through a moving trellis-work of leaves. They had come to a moment which was to be the sweetest in all their lives but one; a moment of perfect confidence, perfect happiness, perfect hope. So they stood quite silently in an ecstasy of contented love, each reading beautiful meanings in the other's steadfast eyes, each seeing and worshipping, in this moment of exalted human feeling, what was best and most worshipful in the other. They felt so strong, so radiant as they walked home, she leaning upon him and not talking at all, that every evil which had been a burden yesterday and would be a burden to-morrow, became a mere shadow slinking into corners and dwindling into insignificance before the flood of sunshine in their hearts. Chloris White, Rahas, Ben Hassan, and the odious Gurton were mere names to George that day, and even when with the following morning the drudgery and petty annoyances of workaday life began again, he carried in his heart such a spring of sweet human happiness that he received the snubs of his chief as cheerfully as if they had been compliments, and bore with fortitude the discovery that Monsieur Ben Hassan had "gone away for a few days on business," leaving his premises in the charge of a stolid boy of thirteen or so, who knew nothing definite about his employer's movements. George therefore kept the earrings in his possession and waited for some claim to be made. It came at the end of a week in the shape of a bill for twelve hundred

and fifty francs, ten of which had been paid on account, for a pair of diamond ear-studs supplied to Monsieur Lauriston. George sent back the ear-studs by registered post with a letter threatening Ben Hassan with the police court. In a few days he got back the ear-studs from the post-office, as the person Ben Hassan was not to be found at the address given. George took no further steps until he was summoned before the Civil Tribunal, where he appeared in the full belief that he had only to relate the facts of the case to confound Ben Hassan and lay him open to the charge of perjury. To his great astonishment and indignation, however, Ben Hassan solemnly swore that he had sold the diamonds as real stones, and calling upon George to produce them, challenged any one in the court to assert that it was possible to suppose they could be bought for ten francs. Could the Englishman's wife assert that she did not know them to be real? George had not dared to bring his wife into court, fearing the effects of the excitement upon her. He weakened his case by asserting emphatically that Ben Hassan was in the pay of a man who wished to ruin him: for he had no proofs to bring forward, and the foreigner's halting French in which he made the accusation compared so unfavourably with the torrent of eloquence with which the artful Parisian refuted it, that, on Ben Hassan's refusing to take back the jewels, the magistrate ordered the Englishman to pay the amount claimed, in monthly instalments of five hundred francs.

With the stolid resistance to unpleasant facts characteristic of his nation, George treated this decision with utter contempt, and indeed believed that Ben Hassan would not dare to push the case further. But on arriving home one rainy day early in the following month, he found his apartments occupied by two *huissiers*, who were busily employed in dragging out into the hall poor Nouna's trunks and such furniture as they had bought themselves, which the landlady, anxious to save her own things, was pointing out to them. Nouna, deathly white and shaking from head to foot, was crouching on the sofa, drawing her breath heavily, and watching them with bright and burning eyes. Fear of what the consequences of this scene might be to her sobered George in his first fierce outburst of indignation. She had hardly moved when he came in, only glancing up at him in shame and terror at what she knew to be the result of

her own indiscretion. He went up to the sofa and reassured her by the kind, firm, protecting pressure of his hand upon her head, while he asked the men by what authority they were acting. They showed him their warrant; nothing could be more correct. He asked them whether they would desist from their work and remain in the hall outside for half an hour, while he went to a friend to try to raise the money. The men consented at once, and retired while George, soothing his agitated wife as well as he could, carried her into the next room, laid her on the bed, and covering her with a rug, told her not to worry herself, as it would be all right in half an hour, when he would be back again with her, and the men would go away satisfied.

With his hand on the door he looked back yearningly. She was quieter now, but as she leaned on her elbows and watched him with feverish eyes, it seemed to him that her gaze was wandering and unintelligent, and that the real matter-of-fact trouble which was sending him on his unpleasant errand had melted in her excited mind to a dim and horrible dread.

"George, don't go, don't go!" rang in his ears as he went down the stairs and out of the house.

Poor George felt that he had never in his life had anything quite so distasteful to do as the task he had before him now of asking a favour of Mr. Gurton. But there was no help for it, and so he put the best face he could upon the matter, got to the bank, where his chief was, he knew, still at this hour to be found, and knocked at the door of his private room.

"Come in," called out the well-known husky voice.

Mr. Gurton was reading a letter. His face was flushed and his eyes were dull, but he had as much command of himself as usual.

"Oh, it's you, is it? What do you want?" he asked with the extra shade of surliness which he used towards the people he did not like.

"Yes, sir," said George. "I am sorry to disturb you after office hours, but it is upon a matter of so much importance to me that I hope you will excuse my coming to you."

"Well, what is it? Be quick."

The words, the appeal, stuck in the young man's throat; but out they must come.

"I am in pressing difficulties, sir ; I can't explain to you how now, but it was through no fault of mine. Just now when I went home I found a couple of men seizing my wife's things. She is in a delicate state of health, and I am afraid of the shock for her. Will you be so kind as to advance me twenty pounds of my salary? I will write to my friends in England to-night, and I shall have the money next week, and will return it to you at once, if you please. It is a very difficult thing for me to ask, but I hope you won't refuse me."

He hurried out the words, not daring to look at Mr. Gurton, who had risen from his chair and walked over to the fire-place with a tread which in its pompous heaviness told George before he looked up that he had failed. There was a slight pause when he finished speaking, Mr. Gurton rattling his watch-chain and clearing his throat. George raised his eyes, and saw that his chief's bloated face expressed nothing but complacent satisfaction. Then the devil woke in the lad with such a hungry fury that he turned hastily to the door, afraid of himself. Mr. Gurton, unluckily, could not resist a little play with his fish, and he called him back. George hesitated, and at last turned slowly. Mr. Gurton paused again to find some particularly offensive form of expression, for he thought he saw his opportunity, by insulting the young fellow past endurance, to force him to resign his post, and so make room for his own reputed nephew. He had been put in possession, too, of a damaging fact against George, and here was the occasion made to his hand, to use it.

"I'm sorry for this little misfortune, Lauriston, deuced sorry ; not only because it is quite beyond my powers to assist you, but because, you see, it's so particularly bad for a House that's just starting, for anything disreputable to be known about its *employés*."

"Disreputable !" echoed George in a low voice, starting erect. "You have no right to use such a word without knowing the facts, Mr. Gurton."

"Oh, I know all about the facts, and so does everybody," said Mr. Gurton with confidential familiarity. "You've got an extravagant little madam for your wife, and somebody of course must pay the piper."

George turned again to leave the room. Mr. Gurton, who was a big, muscular man of six feet two, with two strides reached the door first, admitted a lad with despatches

who was waiting outside, and held the door close as he continued :

“ You must listen, sir, to what I have to say. You were received in this House simply because we were informed that you were highly connected, and that your social position would be an advantage to the firm. What follows? You go nowhere, you know nobody ; you are seen in omnibuses, on penny steamers with a little oddly-dressed girl—”

“ Take care ; you are speaking of my wife,” said George, in a low tremulous voice which, with his bowed head, gave an utterly wrong impression that he was cowed.

Mr. Gurton put his hands in his pockets.

“ Well, sir, and if you choose to marry a courtesan's daughter whom you picked up in the slums—it is——”

Like a wild beast suddenly loosed George had him by the throat, and with hands to which his mad anger gave a grip of steel, he swayed the man's huge frame once forward and flung him back with all his force. Gasping, choking, without time to cry out, Mr. Gurton staggered backwards, his head struck against the corner of an iron safe that stood behind him, and he fell heavily to the floor. Lauriston left the frightened errand-boy to pick him up, and rushed out of the room. He had suddenly remembered that there was one more chance ; a fellow-clerk who was pretty well off lodged in the Rue Saint Honoré. He made his way in that direction, through the still heavily-falling rain, without another thought of the man he had just left, except a savage wish that he had not humiliated himself by applying to the cur.

But Mr. Gurton remained on the floor of his private room, and neither spoke nor moved.

CHAPTER XXVII.

IN the excitement of a battle, when each man deals blows for his life, maddened by the clash of sabres, the roar of cannon, fierce cries, and ghastly sights, he gives and receives wounds of which he takes no account, absorbed in the struggle to beat the enemy back; so George, fighting for something dearer than his own safety, forgot his humiliation at Mr. Gurton's hands, forgot his own outburst of passion and the rash act which followed, and still thought of nothing but Nouna's wild, terror-struck face, and of the next effort he should make to remove the cause of her fear. The fellow-clerk, to whom he was now going to apply, was going out of town for the night; if he should have started already, there would be nothing to do but to telegraph to Lord Florence-court and, while waiting for the help he would be sure to send immediately, to let the *huissiers* carry off what they would as security. This was a terrible contingency, on account of the shock it might give to Nouna; it had to be faced, however, for, on arriving at the lodging of his fellow-clerk, George learned that he had been gone half an hour.

It was not until his last hope of getting immediate help had thus disappeared that George, returning quickly towards his home, remembered what had happened in the office, and realised that by an assault upon his chief, which Mr. Gurton would probably describe as unprovoked, he had lost his situation, and perhaps got himself into a worse scrape still, for he had not waited to find out whether Mr. Gurton had been injured by the fall. George thought he would call at the bank and make inquiries, but on arriving at the corner of the street in which the building stood, he saw that a large and excited crowd had already collected, in spite of the rain, about the doors, and that some *gendarmes* were pressing the people back.

"I suppose the boy rushed out, shrieking 'Murder!' and brought up the whole neighbourhood," thought George. "I hope to heaven he's not seriously hurt."

A sudden chill seized him and his heart seemed to become encased in stone. When a heavy man falls, striking his head on the way to the ground—oh, but nonsense, he should have seen, have known what he had done; he should have realised—What? George left a blank there which he could not fill. The possibility suggested by the sight of that swaying, excited mob, thronging, gesticulating fifty yards in front of him, with morbidly eager faces all upturned towards the windows of the first floor, where the bank was established, was too ghastly, too awful. He tried to laugh at himself for entertaining an idea so fanciful, so ridiculous, but the crowd fascinated him; he could not turn away without—Ah, yes, by going nearer, by joining the stream of people that was still flowing rapidly in that direction, he might learn what sort of a story they had got hold of. The murmurs grew louder as he got deeper and deeper in the throng, until, when he was well wedged in a feverishly eager phalanx of horror-mongers against whom the few *gendarmes* present were altogether powerless, his curiosity was satisfied to the full, for the story banded from mouth to mouth was very definite indeed. A foreigner—English or German, it was not certain which, had had a quarrel with his employer, some said about a woman, some said about money, and had murdered him and escaped. Every version of the tale, however they might differ as to other details, contained the two last items—the murder and the escape of the murderer. George stayed deliberately, looked mechanically up at the windows with the rest of the crowd, and gathering in every different turn of the story, with strained keenness of hearing, hoping desperately to hear some one, brighter-witted and better-informed than the rest, contradict the spreading report and mock at the exaggerations of the herd. The moments dragged on; they were expecting a force of *gendarmes*, and the excitement increased. George, unable to move in the dense mass, was in a state of frenzied defiance of the crowd's surmises, when a quick turn of every head to the left, and an hoarse cry "*Les voilà, les voilà*," told him that the police were coming, and the next instant he was being borne off, a helpless unit in the surging crowd as it retreated before the advancing *gendarmes*. Struggling to work his way out

of the crush of people when free movement became possible, George stumbled against one of the *gendarmes* who had been waiting for assistance to disperse the mob. He was a slim man, scarcely of middle height, and it was he, and not the stalwart young Englishman, who suffered in the collision, staggering a step or two with an oath. But George shrank back with a great shock. If that ugly rumour should have any touch of truth, then his relation to the little slim man was already that of the hare to the hound, and the start would not be long delayed.

He was free from the crowd now, and was hurrying home sick at heart and giddy of brain, trying to realise the possibility he could no longer shirk. If Mr. Gurton were dead, he—George Lauriston—was a murderer. That would be quite clear to any judge and jury; George saw that, with the apparently passionless clearness with which one vivid idea can strike the mind in a state of white-hot excitement. He felt no shock at the act, but only at the consequences, not as they affected himself, but as they touched Nouna. George was not the man to waste emotion over the exit from the world of a man who, if he had had fifty more years of life, would only have used them to add to his record of evil; he had certainly never wished or intended to send him out of it, but, always excepting those ugly consequences, he as certainly did not wish him back. The whole matter presented itself to him only in one light: if the hideous rumour were true, he must leave his wife; what then would become of her? It was to him as if his very heart was pierced and quivering under the point of this torturing thought. He was not troubled by any imaginings of what might be his own fate; his whole soul being merely a storehouse for his devotion to his wife, as his body was a shield to protect and a tool to work for her, there would be nothing left to him worth a man's thought if she were taken away. Taken away! Taken away! The very words as they passed through his brain turned him coward; the clank of his own boots on the stones of the street frightened him, and he turned round with the starting eyes and parted lips of the fugitive, to make sure that he was not already pursued, that before he could see his wife's face again he would not be caught.

He was wet from head to foot and trembling like a leaf by the time he got inside the gateway of the house.

Everything was quiet ; as he glanced at the wife of the *concierge*, sewing behind the glass door of her little room, at the children playing in the yard, at the cat curled up on the stairs, he rebuked himself for his folly in taking a wild mob-rumour for a truth, and comforted by the homely, every-day aspect the house seemed to wear, he ran up the stairs and let himself into the top flat with a lightening heart. At any rate he was sure of one thing : if the worst came to the worst, they could not take him now without one more long look at his darling. In the terrible, searing excitement of the last hour, all George's habitual self-control had given way, and the great passion of his life, which was always burning steadily in the depths of his heart, leapt up in towers of flame, showing luridly every weak spot in his nature. Like the sailor who bursts open the spirit-stores when the ship is past saving, George sprang across the sitting-room with a fierce yearning for his wife's lips, with words more eloquent, caresses more tender, than any he had ever yet showered upon her, ready for one last interview which was to sum up all the happiness they had enjoyed together, to stamp upon her heart and mind, once and for ever, the memory of the man who had held her as the jewel of his soul, who set no value on his own life without her.

He opened the bedroom door with clammy, trembling hands. Was he blinded by the rushing blood in his brain, or dazed by the sudden change from the lamp-light in the hall to the murky dimness of the fading daylight ? Or was Nouna really not there ? He crossed the floor to the bed, calling to her hoarsely by name, and hunting with his hands over every inch of the tumbled quilt where she had lain that afternoon. He went out on to the balcony, walking from end to end of it with his hand along the wet and slippery railing, feeling for her all the way, as if unable to trust to the senses of sight and sound. Then he returned to the sitting-room and still groping in the dusk, gave forth a loud cry that made the roof ring.

"Nouna ! Nouna !"

The door opened slowly ; but as he rushed towards it he met only Madame Barbier, the landlady, who, scared and shivering, tried to retreat. But George caught her by the wrists and forced her to answer him.

"Where is my wife ?"

"Oh, monsieur, monsieur, don't you know? Have you missed her? Don't look like that, or I cannot, I will not answer you, monsieur; you frighten me; it is not my fault, I have done nothing, nothing at all."

George put his hand to his head with a muttered curse on the woman's torturing idiotcy, and then forced himself to speak to her calmly.

"My dear madame, surely you can see I don't want to frighten you. But for God's sake speak out."

Slowly, hesitatingly, paralysed by a sudden fear that the news she had would prove even more disquieting than suspense, she spoke.

"When you were gone, monsieur, and the *huissiers* were still here"—George started; he had forgotten the *huissiers*, and their disappearance had not troubled him—"a gentleman called, monsieur, saying he was a friend of yours, and he asked for you; and when I said you were out he said he would see madame. She came out to see him, monsieur, and shrieked when she met him; I know, monsieur, because I followed her into the room after helping her to dress, and she told me to stay."

George held himself as still as stone, afraid of stopping the recital.

"A dark-skinned man," he said, not questioningly.

"Yes, monsieur. Madame wished to retire, but he would not allow it. I gathered that he said the mother of madame was waiting to see her, and that you, monsieur, were with her, and that she had sent money to get monsieur and madame out of their little difficulty. So he paid the men and got a receipt from them, and they left. And madame put on her things and went away with him in a fiacre. And I am sure, monsieur, that if I had supposed you would have any objection——"

George let her hand drop.

"When did they go?" he asked in a strangled whisper.

"Not long after you, monsieur. I am sure I thought every moment that you would be back together. But, ah! monsieur is ill! Can I not assist you? Some *eau de vie*——"

George had reeled into a chair and was breathing heavily. This last shock brought no pang; something began clicking and whirring in his head, and he thought he felt a hard, cold substance pressing closer and closer to his neck till he could

not breathe, but began to choke and to gurgle, tearing with both hands at his throat to get the tightening grip away.

"Ah, the knife ! the knife !" he burst out hoarsely, as he staggered up on to his feet with starting eyes and labouring breath. "Take her away ! take her away ! Don't let her see me !"

And he fell to the floor in a fit, just as a loud knocking began on the outer door of the flat.

When he came to himself he was in the tender hands of the police. They treated him very civilly however, told him they could wait while he changed his clothes, which had been soaked through and through by the heavy rain, and caused George, who was too much exhausted in mind and body to feel even his uncertainty about his wife except as a dull pain, to think kindly of the French allowance for "extenuating circumstances." He was quite broken down, and, regardless of the shivering fits which seized him in rapid succession, was ready to go with them at once, only asking on what charge he was arrested. On learning that it was for murderous assault, he seemed scarcely enough master of himself to feel relieved that it was no worse ; and when they added that it might be changed to a graver one if the injured man, who had been taken to a hospital, should die before the trial, George merely nodded without any sign of vivid interest. Indeed, if he had had complete command of his feelings and his wits, he would not have cared two straws whether Mr. Gurton lived or died. The sentence George had incurred would certainly at the best be a term of imprisonment, at the end of which, whether the period were long or short, Nouna would be as effectually lost to him as if he were already dead.

George Lauriston was of the highly nervous, imaginative temperament to which ambition, hope, devotion are as the springs of life ; when these were stopped or dried up, he became at once the withered husk of a man, a helpless log, not chafing at his confinement, not resigning himself to it, but living through the dull days like a brute, without emotion, almost without thought, weighed down by a leaden depression which threatened to end in the most fearful of all madness—a haunted melancholy. He learned without interest on the second day after his arrest that Mr. Gurton was dead. His formal appearance before the magistrate

did him an unrecognised good, by rousing him out of his torpor into a strong sense of shame which bit into his very bones. To appear before a crowd, among whom were some of his Paris acquaintances, a prisoner, a social wreck, with every hope blighted, every honest ambition killed, was an ordeal for which he had to summon all his shaken manliness for one last gallant effort to show a stubborn face to fate. There was a worse experience before him. When he was brought into court to be formally committed for trial, the first faces he saw were those of Dicky Wood and Clarence Massey, the latter of whom wept like a child in open court, and was threatened with ejection for his repeated offers of bail to the extent of every penny he possessed. Lord Florencecourt was not present. It gave George a shock to hear that the charge against him was murder ; the presence of his old comrades seemed to emphasise the gravity of the case, which he realised for the first time since his arrest. When asked if he had anything to say, he answered : "I am not guilty. I reserve my defence," and remained stoically erect and grave while he was formally committed for trial and removed from the court.

On the following day, however, he received two visits ; the first was from a well-known Parisian barrister, who had been retained for his defence by Clarence Massey, and had come to receive his client's instructions. The second was from Ella Millard, who was paler, thinner, plainer than ever, and who trembled from head to foot as her hand touched his.

"Ella, my dear girl, you should not have come," said he, more distressed by her grief than by his own plight ; "I can't understand how Sir Henry and Lady Millard allowed you to come."

"They didn't allow me ; I just came," answered Ella in a shaking voice, with a little Americanism she had caught from her mother. "And I've given uncle Horace such a talking-to as he never had before, even from my aunt. I only heard about it yesterday ; they kept the papers from us ; but I've made up for lost time since."

She was neither tender nor gentle ; perhaps she could not trust herself to be either. Her eyes wandered quickly from one object to another, never resting upon his for two seconds at a time ; upon her face there was a fixed scared look, as if her muscles had been frozen at the moment of some fearful

shock. She spoke very rapidly, and scarcely allowed him a chance of answer or comment.

"It is very sweet and kind of ——" he began, when she started off again.

"Oh, no, I haven't been sweet at all; I never am, you know. First I scolded papa and mamma for not letting us know; then, as I told you, I went for uncle Horace; and now I've come to finish by an attack upon you. You have been ungrateful and foolish towards us, George; you know we all love——"

Her voice trembled, and she stopped. As for George, the sudden flood of warm sympathy and friendship was too much for him. He took her hand in a vehement grasp, and turned his back upon her.

"And now," she continued briskly, though her fingers twitched in the clasp of his, "we mustn't waste time. I didn't come to make a fool of myself, but to see if there wasn't something I could do for you. Where is Nouna, George?"

He turned round quickly, and looking straight into her eyes, saw how well she read his heart, and pressed her hands against his breast with passionate gratitude. She drew them hastily away.

"Well, well, tell me what you know, or what you want to know," she cried, stamping her foot impatiently. "We've heard all sorts of stories already, of course."

"What stories? Yes, yes, tell me, tell me everything."

"Oh, that she ran away from you, and that was why you quarrelled with the man."

"And what did you think?"

"I said it was nonsense. People always think that a little lively woman who talks fast and has playful ways must be a perfect fool, but I told them Nouna had quite sense enough to know that she had a good husband, and that if she had already left off loving you it was because you had beaten her—which I did not believe."

"Ella, you're a—a—brick."

"That is to say I'm a hard little thing made for use, and not for ornament. I see," said she quite saucily. "Well, now tell me what has become of her."

"I—don't—know," said George slowly, with such laboured utterance that Ella grew instantly very serious, guessing the gravity of his fears. "If you—if you could find her—"

Suddenly he gave way, and, dropping on to a chair, hid his face in his hands. There was a little pause, during which Ella stood so motionless that he might have fancied himself alone ; then he felt her hands on his head, not with a hesitating timid touch, but with the firm pressure of fingers that seemed to act as conductors of the human strength and kindness that lay in her own heart.

"Tell me all you fancy, or all you fear, George. I wormed everything out of my poor uncle Horace last night, so you may speak to me quite freely. Do you think she has gone back to her mother?"

The mere mention of this suggestion in a matter-of-fact tone, without any affectation of shrinking, or horror, conveyed a vague sense of comfort. It implied that this was the most likely course to have been taken, and also the most to be desired. He looked up and fixed his eyes on hers with the hopeful confidence of a child towards the stranger who lets it out of the dark cupboard where it has been shut up for punishment.

"She was taken away by a trick, just before I was arrested. The man who did it was a wretch who has been in the pay of—of her mother, and who was in love with her himself. Ella, can you understand?"

She shivered ; the look of agony in his eyes was too horrible to be borne. She wrenched her right hand from his and brought it sharply down on his shoulder.

"Look here !" she said earnestly, "you are torturing yourself without cause ; I am sure of it. I am a woman, and I can feel what a woman would do. Nouna is sharp and bright, and even cunning upon occasion. She would not be ten minutes in that man's society without knowing that she must be on her guard ; I suppose he promised to take her to her mother ; then depend upon it she would never let him rest until he had done so."

"Ah, but you don't know all, Ella. Her mother hates me——"

"—— quarrelled with you, and threatened all sorts of awful things, I know ; uncle Horace told me. But George, you silly old George, don't you know that after all she's her *mother*, and do you really believe that when Nouna came to her, flinging her arms about her, worshipping her, and looking upon her as her refuge, her safety—remember that !—that she would, or could undo all the work of her life, and

use now to make her daughter miserable means which she would not use before to make her, according to *her* notions, happy?"

George's face grew lighter; he looked up out of the window and then turned again to the girl.

"Certainly—as you put it—it seems possible—"

"Of course it is possible, probable, and I will stake my word—true. You men are good creatures, but you can't reason. Now I will write direct to the mother——"

"My dear Ella, I don't think you must do that. Ask Lady Mill——"

"Nonsense. Don't be old-maidish. To-morrow you shall hear something—something good, I earnestly believe."

"Ella, you are killing me," said George in a stifled voice. "If you knew—what it is—after these awful days—and nights—to hear——"

"A human voice again? I know," said she, speaking more hurriedly than ever to hide the breaks that would come in her clear tones. "Only don't trouble, don't worry yourself. Clarence Massey—bless him!—has been crawling on the ground for me to walk upon him ever since he found I—I—I was coming to—to see you. His grandfather is just dead, and he has come into £4,000 a year, and he wants to bribe all the prison officials with annuities to let you escape. We caught the barrister outside when he left you, and when he said they could not bring it in—the worst——" here her voice gave way, "there was not evidence enough, we could both have kissed him, George; I'm sure we could."

She had talked herself out of breath, and was obliged to stop, panting and agitated through all her hectic liveliness. George himself was speechless and could do nothing but wring her hands, so she went on again after a moment's pause.

"You mustn't expect to get off altogether, I'm afraid. I dare not speak about this much, because it is so dreadful to us all—everybody. But you must keep a good heart, for you have friends as deep as the sea and as firm as the rocks, George; and as for your little wife, why she shall live among us like a qu—queen in exile until her lord comes back again to make her ha—happy."

The warder had been clicking the keys outside for some minutes; he now gently opened the door and gave a respectful cough. George seized the girl's hands and

pressed upon them kisses that left red marks on the pale flesh before he could let her go.

"God bless you, Ella," he whispered hoarsely, "you have saved my heart from breaking."

The next moment the door shut upon her, but the radiance shed upon the bare walls by the pure sweet woman illumined them still.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A NIGHT, and a day, and a night, and a day, and again a night passed during which time George heard nothing more of his ministering angel or her promised comfort. Then on the second day his door opened, and a lady to see him was announced. The few instants which elapsed before she appeared were more intensely exciting to him than the pause before the judge pronounces sentence is to the prisoner. It was not Ella ; she would have been in like a sparrow before the announcement was well out of the warder's mouth. His suspense did not last a half-minute. With slow and hesitating steps a woman entered, oddly dressed in garments that were obviously never intended to be worn together ; a shabby old grey flannel dressing-gown with scraps of torn lace trailing along the floor behind her, an opera-cloak of light brown satin embroidered in gold thread bordered with sable-tails and fastened by a brooch of sapphires, a battered black bonnet and a lace veil as thick as a mask, formed a costume so grotesque that at the first moment George failed to recognise in the odd figure the luxurious and once daintily dressed Chloris White. The change in her, when she took off her veil as the warder retreated, was even more striking : it appalled George, who had not had enough experience of women of her class and their dismal vagaries to understand this ghastly but common metamorphosis of the beauty of one day to the hag of the next. He had thought in the glare of the sunlight, that afternoon when he had carried her off to the boat, that the liberal daubing of pink and white and black made her beautiful face hideous ; now, as she sat, heedless of her appearance, in the full light of the little barred window, her face as innocent of paint as his own, though not so clean,

looked, in its withered yellowness, with its sunken eyes and vicious furrows, so inexpressibly uncanny and revolting, that he was forced to acknowledge the wisdom of a practice which disguised in some measure the ugly traces of base thoughts and foul deeds. He had seen her first in all the pride of her vogue, of her success in the career she had chosen ; now he saw her in the alternate mood of a degradation, a self-abandonment, a wretchedness, which mocked the possessor of treasures which would have made an art-museum rich, and of jewels and furs which now only served, the former to enhance the weird hideousness of her sallow skin, the latter to emphasise the slovenliness of her attire.

She seemed ill at ease and frightened : the daughter of an English gentleman and an Indian princess, her wayward course of life had reduced her native grace and dignity to mere accidents of mood, and a check or a disappointment made her destitute of either. George was horror-struck, and could not speak, but stood waiting for her to explain the object of her visit. From the moment of her entrance, he had forgotten her connection with Nouna ; he was brought back to startled recollection by her first words, which were spoken in a querulous, tearful voice.

"Well, you have sent to ask me where is your wife. It is I who come to ask where is my child ?"

"Nouna !" exclaimed George in a low voice. "You do not know where she is ?"

"No. You have spoilt her for her mother, you have made her look down upon me, fear me. And what have you done for her yourself ? What has she become through you ? How have you kept your fine promises to me ? You were too proud to take my money ; it was too base for your fine fingers to touch ; she was to be rich, and honoured, and happy through you ! And what happens ? What happens, I say ?" Her excitement was increasing as she talked, until the low tones he had admired in her voice became shrill and nasal, and the great brown eyes, which had looked languishing and seductive when she raised and lowered them artfully between thick fringes of long black lashes, now flamed and flashed in her dry, parched skin like fires in a desert. "You fling away all your chances, you go to work as a common clerk, you make her—my daughter, *my* beautiful daughter—live like a dressmaker in two wretched rooms, and then you let her be carried off from you under

your very nose, so that she comes back to me ill, miserable, her beauty spoilt, her heart breaking—the wife of a criminal.”

In the course of her violent speech this woman had wrung his heart again and again, not by her reproaches, but by the pictures she had called up of Nouna. What had the poor child learnt about her mother? How had she borne it? She had been shocked, disgusted, so he gathered. Poor little thing, poor little thing! And what had she learnt about him? So his thoughts ran in a running commentary, and when Chloris White stopped, moaning to herself in bitter scorn and anger, he had to clear his throat again and again before he could speak.

“Then she is with you?” he said at last huskily.

The woman raised her head in fierce petulance.

“No, no, no, I tell you. She is not with me—she has left me, and I don’t know where she has gone.”

A great river of pain, mingled with which ran one tiny current of sweet sad pleasure, seemed to rush through the heart of the stricken young husband at the image these words called up before him, of the poor little wife coming for refuge into her mother’s home, gathering some inkling of the terrible truth that her idol was not all she had believed, and shrinking as her husband would have had her do, as her mother fancied she would not do, from the luxury that bore a taint, creeping out into the world again, perhaps to come back to Paris alone in search of himself.

“You don’t know where she has gone!” he repeated in a softer voice, for he recognised genuine human feeling in the woman’s tones.

“No, I tell you.”

“When did she leave you?”

“Two days ago. I have hunted for her ever since; I came to Paris to look for her. Then a lady, a Miss Millard, one of Lord Florencecourt’s nieces—one of *my* nieces,” she added defiantly, “telegraphed to my house in London, and the telegram was forwarded to me here; you wanted to know whether Nouna was with me, she said. She is not with me, she is lost, wandering about in the world by herself, ill, out of her mind, perhaps. Are you satisfied? See what your education has done for her, see the grand result of your virtuous principles. She would have been safe in my house and happy, and could have been as good as she pleased, I

never prevented her, I never should have prevented her. But you have touched her with your own infernal cursed coldness and idiotcy, and nothing would please her. During the two days she was with me, it was nothing but : ‘ When is George coming ? Do you think George will come by the next train ? ’ You haven’t even made her good either, for when I offered to take her to church, she wouldn’t go with me, but let me go alone. You have spoilt her life, you have killed her.”

She burst into a passion of tears. George paid no attention to her, but walked up and down, torturing himself by imagining what could have become of his wife, and wondering when Ella would come again, that he might consult the bright-brained girl as to the next step to take to find her. He was deeply anxious to know all that had passed between Nouna and her mother and Rahas, but he almost despaired of learning anything from the hysterical creature before him. Gradually, however, Chloris White seemed to wake to the fact that she was being ignored, and she tried to recover some calm and a semblance of dignity.

“ What have you to say for yourself ? Don’t you understand what you have to answer for ? ” she asked with asperity.

George stopped short in his walk up and down the narrow space at his command, and looked at her with a troubled face, but in his voice there was a quiet and biting contempt as he replied—

“ I have to answer for having fostered what was best in her nature till she was strong enough to resist all the temptations your wicked folly could suggest, that’s all.”

And he began to walk up and down again. Chloris White sprang from her chair and stopped him by a violent grip of his arm.

“ How dare you say such things to me, you, who are the cause of it all ! ”

George removed her hand from his arm and looked down at her sternly.

“ Madam, you are talking nonsense,” he said ; “ your daughter was perfectly happy with me ; you set a mischievous rascal to work to get us into difficulties, to entice her away from me ; and it is through no fault of yours that the scoundrel didn’t succeed in ruining her as he has done me. When you came in here just now you seemed

human enough to be ashamed of yourself, and I said nothing to you. Now that you have overcome your shame, I have overcome my forbearance, and I tell you plainly you are the most corrupt, depraved and vile creature I ever met, and it would be better for Nouna to take shelter in a workhouse than in your home. Now you had better go, I cannot bear the sight of you."

The contemptuous brutality with which he shot these rough words at her and then turned away proved a far more effective mode of treatment than the courteous composure he had shown at the beginning of the interview; for self-restraint is a quality little understood or practised by women of her class and their companions. She at once became submissive and apologetic, rose and walked meekly towards the door.

"I am sorry I intruded upon you; I thought you would like to hear what I knew about your wife; I will go."

George was immediately shocked at his own savagery, and without approaching or looking at her said he had not meant to be rude, his temper was not improved by confinement, and he should be very glad if she would tell him something—anything, only she must tell him nothing but the truth.

"Yes, yes, I will tell you the truth indeed," she said humbly, clasping her hands with restless impulsiveness, and recognising, with the shrewdness of long practice in the arts of pleasing men, that to relate bare facts was her best chance with this one. "She came to me five days ago—in the early morning—to my house in London. It was the day after she left you. The person who brought her——"

"Rahas?" interrupted George sharply.

"Yes, Rahas—had told her (I assure you he was not acting by my authority)——"

"Go on, go on."

"Rahas had told her that you had come to me—that I was in Paris, that I was ready to help you (indeed, I should have been, I assure you)."

George moved again brusquely, and Chloris hastened back to the facts.

"He took her to an hotel, but Nouna mistrusted him, and insisted on remaining in the fiacre while he went in to see if I was there. When he had gone in she jumped out of the cab, made inquiries of the proprietress, and found I

had never been to the hotel at all. (You understand, Mr. Lauriston, that all this was without my sanction ?) ”

“ Perfectly,” said George, with the best accent of sincerity he could muster.

“ She was going to drive back home when Rahas ran out of the hotel, told her the fact was I was ill in England, was dying to see her, and had sent him to bring her over by a trick, since I knew her husband would not let her come. Nouna was worked upon so much by this, that, as they had driven to the Gare du Nord, and were just in time for the Calais train, she decided on the impulse of the moment to come, but insisted on travelling in the ladies’ compartment of the train, and in the ladies’ cabin on board, so that he saw very little of her on the journey, until they got to Charing Cross, where she got into a hansom by herself, and refused to come into my house until Sundran went out to reassure her. Apparently, Mr. Lauriston, marriage had not increased her trust in human nature.”

“ It has taught her to discriminate, madam.”

“ I was not up. She was taken into my boudoir, and I dressed and went to see her. She was standing just inside the door, waiting ; she was flushed, and trembling, and so weak with fatigue and excitement that she almost fell into my arms. But then—”

Chloris stopped. Something in these vivid memories was keenly painful to her.

“ She knew—you were her mother ?” said George in a low voice.

Chloris, who had related her story standing so that he could only see her side-face, turned the full gaze of her black eyes upon him defiantly.

“ Well, take what pride in it you like, she drew back from my arms, and looked at me, and the colour went out of her face, and left her quite white, with dark rings under her eyes, and she asked, in a weak whisper : ‘ Are you really my mother ? ’ Perhaps I looked angry and spoke harshly ; I thought of you, and how you had poisoned her mind against me, and she ran to the door with a wild, scared face, and cried : ‘ George ! Where is George ? ’ And she glanced round the room like a caged bird, and fell down crying on to the floor. So I left her, for I saw you had taken her from me altogether, and Sundran went to her and made her bathe and rest, and she wrote out a telegram to

you, and fell asleep crying. When I saw her again she was quite meek and subdued, and sat with me very quietly, not talking, but looking at me with wondering, inquiring eyes that haunt me. For I tell you I have loved my child, and it was hard to find that she had no heart left for me. Then I was sorry that I—sorry that she had come; and when I learnt what had happened to you, I was angry, furiously angry with Rahas, and I would not let him come near the house, and I did not know what to do with the child. She could not be happy with me—you had spoilt her for that. I gave her a beautiful dress I had had made, and she said: 'I will wear it when George comes.' She would not meet my friends, and I did not press her; she did just as she liked, and took walks with Sundran instead of driving with me. And on the third morning she was gone. Her bed had not been slept in, and the footman said she had gone out late the night before. She left a note thanking me for being kind, and saying she could not rest till she saw her husband again. Then I came over here to look for her, for I love her, and I love her no less for her not loving me. I went to the rooms where you stayed, but she had not been there, and all I found of her there was this."

She handed to George two telegrams, both addressed to himself. They had been opened by Chloris. Both were from Nouna. One had been sent from Dover on her journey. It said:

"I have gone to see mamma, who is ill. She will help us. Come at once, or I shall think you are angry."

The second was sent from London, and contained these words:

"Come to me quickly, I am frightened and ill. Start at once. I hear your voice calling to me, and I have not money enough to come."

As George read these words his sight failed him, and a great sob shook his whole frame. Chloris tried to take back the two scraps of flimsy paper, but he thrust them into his breast.

"No, they are mine," he said in a broken voice.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"As you like," said she in a hard tone. "After all I have a better consolation than you have."

George looked at her inquiringly.

"I was born ambitious," she continued, "as the unlucky

daughter of a princess had a right to be. I centred my ambition unselfishly on my daughter ; you and she frustrated me. Well, I can still be Viscountess Florencecourt—and I will.”

George pulled himself together to make a good fight for his old friend. This devil-may-care creature, who was beginning to find the oft-tried excitements fail, was just in the mood to plunge head foremost into the delights of starting a new and sensational scandal. George took care to speak with the greatest calmness.

“I don’t think you will, though, when you think about it. You are too clever.”

“I am too clever to fail to do so, I flatter myself.”

“You are quite clever enough, madam, to convince every separate person you talk to of the justice of your claim, but with the general public, with society, the bar, the bench, all reason, sympathy, and probably law, would be against you. I don’t think you could get a firm of standing to take up your case.”

“Don’t you ?” said Chloris, raising her eyebrows incredulously, while her face assumed an expression of deep cunning. “And what if I assure you that I have prepared for this contingency by *making* a firm of standing ready to my hand ?”

George suddenly remembered the utter and rather inexplicable devotion to her interests shown by Messrs. Smith and Angelo, and listened with curiosity as she went on :

“Four years ago a son of old Angelo’s went mad about me, and robbed his father to make me handsome presents. The old man was dreadfully cut up. I learnt the facts, and knowing the reputation of the firm was good, I earned the eternal gratitude of the father by throwing over the son, and making restitution to the extent of some four thousand pounds. Do you understand ?”

“I see that you have gained a solicitor devoted to your interests ; but I maintain that it would be directly against your interest to put pressure on the Colonel. I know him ; I know that he would resist your claim with such influence to back him as even you could not stand against ; and I know on the other hand”—George lowered his voice, and spoke with slow significance—“that if you are content to let things remain as they are, he will be quite ready to make *private* redress by making such provision for you, when you

choose to ask for it, as even the daughter of a princess would not refuse."

Chloris was interested to the extent of evidently occupying herself with a mental calculation.

"*Ask* for it! I could *claim* it!" she said defiantly.

"But as a claim it would not be allowed."

Chloris shrugged his shoulders, but she was impressed. She knew that her charms had passed their zenith, and a handsome provision for the future was not to be despised. George was satisfied with the impression he had made, and extremely anxious to be rid of her. In fact they both felt glad that the reappearance of the warder now brought to a close a visit which had been prompted by no very kindly feeling. At the last Chloris seemed to feel this, and she lingered at the door to say, in a voice that had some womanly kindness and some self-reproach in it:

"I am sorry I came, for I have done you no good. I was thinking of nothing but my child—my disappointment. Forgive me. I am not bad all through, and I thank you for what you have done for her. We can feel for each other now, you and I, different as we are: we have both lost her. If I have had any hand in bringing you here, forgive me, for my life is broken too."

George held out his hand. Not that he believed much in the permanency of the capricious creature's grief, but that it was impossible for him to refuse pardon to any one who asked for it sincerely. She kissed his fingers passionately, to his great discomfiture; for not only had he a Briton's natural objection to demonstrations of this sort, but his clemency towards the woman who had done her utmost to cause the wreck of his life was only the result of a surface sentiment of pity which thinly covered a very much deeper feeling of disgust and resentment, and when the door closed behind her he shook himself like a dog, with an impulse to get free from the very air which she had breathed.

George had no more visits, except from his advocate, for the next two days; but on the third he received a note from the Colonel, dated from England, and written in a perturbed and rather constrained tone, containing a backward shot at his foolishness in marrying a girl of whom he knew nothing, some sincere condolences and regrets at his situation, and a useful expression of fear that he, the Colonel, was "in for it now." On the whole, the possibility that Chloris White

would now turn her attention entirely to him seemed to have swamped Lord Florencecourt's kindness, and George wrote him the following answer not without some bitter feelings :

"DEAR LORD FLORENCECOURT,

"I thank you very much for the kind things you say. But as for my marriage, which you deplore as the beginning of the mess I am in, I assure you I am just in the same mind about it as I was at the time when I gave my name to the forlorn little creature whose natural guardians had left her at the mercy of they didn't care who. I don't stand so well in the world now as I did then, but I think I am no worse a man for having loved something better than my ambition, and taught my wife to love something better than her trinkets. I have done my best to secure her nearest male relation from annoyance, and I think I have succeeded ; I hope that this circumstance will induce him to make every effort to find her and take care of her, if his instinct does not. I pray you, with the solemn prayer of a man who may be dead to the world, to persuade him to this. If I were satisfied about her, they might do what they liked to me and welcome.

"Yours very sincerely,

"GEORGE LAURISTON."

Within a fortnight of Chloris White's visit George, ill and feverish from neglected cold and reduced to a state of almost imbecile disquietude not for himself, but for the wife of whose fate no one could, or no one dared to give him tidings, was examined by the judge, according to French law, and brought up for trial. The proceedings produced in him not even a languid appearance of interest ; accusation and defence seemed to his worn-out weary brain only a long monotonous buzz of unmeaning words, and when the verdict was pronounced, he did not know whether it was more or less severe than he had expected.

He was acquitted of the charge of wilful murder, but found guilty of homicide, and sentenced to five years' penal servitude.

George repeated the words to himself, trying to realise them. But all he knew was that he was thankful the trial was over.

CHAPTER XXIX.

It is well for the wounded spirit when the body falls sick in sympathy, and the piercing thoughts become blunted into vague fancies, and the heavy load of doubt and despair falls off with the responsibilities of sane and sound existence.

George Lauriston, who had been unconsciously sickening ever since the day when he was arrested, and, stupefied by misery, had gone off to prison in clothes which had been saturated with the rain, was, on the day after his conviction, too ill to stand; his skin was hot and dry, his eyes were glazed and dull, and his limbs racked with pains. The surgeon, on being sent for to see him, ordered his immediate removal to the hospital, where for three weeks he was laid up with a sharp attack of rheumatic fever. He recovered very slowly, but as this is a common case with sick prisoners, who not unnaturally prefer the relaxed discipline and better food of the hospital ward to the monotonous life and meagre fare which awaits them on their convalescence, he received no special attention on that account, and as soon as he was declared fit to be removed, he was consigned to Toulon with a batch of other convicts destined, like himself, for work in the dockyards. He was visited in his illness by Ella Millard, but he was unable either to recognise her, or to learn from her lips the painful tidings that every effort to find his wife had proved fruitless. He started on his miserable journey, therefore, without one parting word to cherish during the long months which must elapse before he could see a friend's face again, and knowing nothing of the efforts that were being made on his behalf.

The New World energy which poor little Lady Millard had used only to force herself into the same mould as her husband's less vivacious compatriots, had blossomed out in

her youngest daughter to a quality of the highest order, capable, on occasion, of transforming the plain, unobtrusive girl into something like a heroine. Ella was convinced that the sentence passed upon George Lauriston was unduly severe, and further, that if carried out it would kill him ; therefore she put forth all her powers of perseverance and resource in the endeavour to get it mitigated. To her uncle, Lord Florencecourt, and her aunt Lady Crediton, both of whom were persons of influence, she did not allow one moment's rest until, through the English ambassador at Paris, she had obtained a hearing of the French Minister of the Interior. In this, however, she did not succeed until the following spring, by which time her poor friend's release by surer means seemed to be drawing near.

Before the winter was more than half through George believed that he was dying. The authorities of the prison thought so too, and out of compassion for the "*bel Anglais*," whose athletic form, distinction of movement and manner, and the old thoroughness and absorption with which he did whatever work he had to do, had gained him the same sort of reputation among the lowest of mankind that he had formerly held among the highest, they shortened the preliminary term of confinement within the walls, and put him with the workers in the dockyard, in the hope that the open air, nipping and keen as it was in these winter days, might restore the failing vigour of his frame, and check a hacking cough which made even the warders shrug their shoulders and mutter "*pauvre diable !*" as they walked up and down the echoing stone corridors in the frosty nights of the early year.

March had come, with bitter winds and no sign of the winter's breaking, when George Lauriston was sent, as one of a small gang of convicts, to repair a breach in the harbour made during a storm the day before. There was some hard and hazardous work involved, a portion of the structure having been rendered unsafe by the tearing away, by the action of the waves, of the outer piles placed to break their force. Glad of the excitement, however, and of the nearer approach to their kind of the outer world which the walk to and from the harbour afforded, the gang of convicts, picked out of the smartest and best-conducted men, went to this novel work with more alacrity than usual. The weather was still rough ; the waves, of a troubled greenish-brown colour, were crested

with white, and the wind drove the drizzling sleet straight from the north.

In spite of the fierce gusts of wind, of the clouds of saturating spray which broke up against the wall of the harbour and fell with a patter and a hiss on to the stone, on the first day that the convicts worked there, a small, slender woman, poorly dressed, who fought the wind with difficulty and caught her breath with deep-drawn, struggling sobs as if the exertion hurt her, crept slowly along the outer side of the slippery pier through the dense sea-showers, until she was within a few feet of the warder who walked, with fixed bayonet, up and down, guarding the convicts on the land side. The warder stopped, and asked her rather brusquely what she wanted.

"Nothing; I only want to get as near as I can to the sea. It's good for me," she answered fluently, but in a foreigner's French.

And as she looked ill enough for every breath she drew to be already numbered, and fixed her eyes yearningly on the horizon as if no nearer object was of moment to her, he let her stay. But each time that his back was turned on his walk she was up like a hare, in spite of her evident weakness, eagerly scanning the workers in their coarse grey uniforms, searching, searching, until at last, at her third scrutiny, she discovered the man she wanted. It was George Lauriston. He was working with a will, pickaxe in hand, his feet now in, now out of the water, his back towards her, his arms rising at regular intervals, as he dealt blow after blow at the solid masonry. She did not cry out as she recognised him; she did not even try to attract his attention; but fell back into her former position and retained it unchanged through two or three turns and returns of the warder up and down. The one glance had intoxicated her; she doubted her own powers of self-restraint, that gave her the blessed privilege of seeing him, her own husband, in the flesh, after those long dark months of absence when he had come to her only in dreams.

After a little while she noted, sitting crouched under the wall, out of sight of the convicts, that the blows of the pickaxe had ceased. If for a few moments he was resting, he might, if God would be kind, turn this way, see her, meet her gaze with his, give her one short kiss of the eyes that she might carry home and nurse in her memory through the

long nights when she lay awake thinking of him. She waited, scarcely drawing breath, till the warder turned again. She had ten full seconds for her venture. Scudding over the great stones like a lapwing she reached the breach again, and looked over. A cry rose from her heart, but she stifled it as, through spray, rain, mist, the wind-driven rain cutting her tender face like stones, the waves shooting up great geysers of white foam close to her, she met the look that through long weeks of illness she had hungered for.

"Nouna!" cried George, with a hoarse shout that the waves drowned with their thunder.

Finger on lip she sped back in a moment, leaving him dazed, stupefied, half believing, half hoping the figure he had seen was only a vision of his imagination. For could that little pinched, wasted face, in which the great brown eyes stood out weirdly, be the bonny bride whose beauty had seemed to him almost supernatural? He set to work again mechanically, hardly knowing what he did; but when the short day began to draw in, and a veil of inky clouds to bring a shroud-like shadow over the sea, and the warders gave the word to cease work and muster for the march back to the prison, he saw the little weird face again, read the short sad message of unwavering love and weary longing in her great passion-bright eyes, and resisting, with one supreme effort of the old soldierly habit of discipline, the dangerous temptation to risk everything and break the ranks for an embrace, which his failing health told him would certainly be the last, he marched on with the rest, and left her to creep—benumbed with cold and wet to the skin, but feverishly happy in the knowledge that she had seen him again—back to her home to live on the hope of another such meagre meeting.

The next day was wild, stormy, and bitterly cold, with a driving north-east wind, and intermittent snow-showers. But when the convicts were marched down to the harbour, Nouna was already there, crouching—a small, inert bundle of grey waterproof—under the shelter of a pile of huge stones, watching for her husband's coming with hungry eyes. When the tramp, tramp, upon the flags told her the gang was approaching she peeped out cautiously, and then, afraid lest in her desire to escape the notice of any one but George, she should escape his also, she rose, crept out a few paces from her shelter, and turned her face boldly towards the advancing

men. George was in the front rank to-day ; in the morning light, which beat full upon his face, she saw him well, saw a terrible change in him ; even while he, on his side, noted more fully the transformation in the little fairy princess who had taken his whole nature by storm less than a year ago—from a lovely unthinking child into a sick and desolate woman. How could he think, as he looked at her, that there was anything but loss in a change which rent his very heart, and moved him as no allurements of her beauty, no wile of her sensuous coquetry had ever done ? In spite of the educational enthusiasm he had spent upon his sixteen-year-old bride, in spite of his genuine anxiety to surround her with elevating and spiritualising influences, it thus happened that when at last the spirit instead of the senses shone out of her yearning eyes, it gave him no gladness, but rather a deep regret, and instead of thanking heaven for waking the soul he had in vain longed to reach, he cursed his own fate that he had brought about this change in the woman for whom he was at all times ready to die.

He did not pass very near to her, for the little creature was cowed and shy, afraid of bringing some punishment upon him by any sign of intelligence. He tried to speak to her, tried to tell her not to wait there, exposed to the bitter wind and the lightly falling snow ; but his voice was hoarse and broken, nothing escaped his lips but guttural sounds, which did not even reach her ears. So that when, after a couple of hours' work upon the rough stones of the pier, he again came in sight of his wife, crouching in the same place, watching patiently for another brief sight of him, he took, to save her from the risks her fragile frame was running, a resolve, the execution of which cut him like a knife. He went up to the warder and said :

"That is my wife. She will die of cold if she stays. Please speak to her gently."

George saw, as he turned to go back to his work, the poor child's white frightened face as the warder addressed her. Slowly, with one long straining gaze, as if she would draw her loved one into her arms by the passionate force of her yearning eyes, she turned, and George saw her hurry away down the pier as fast as her chilled limbs would let her : and he felt that the little retreating figure which soon became a mere speck against grey sky, grey sea, grey stone, had carried away the last shred of human hope and human

feeling that prison life and failing health had left in his breast.

Next day, which was the last of the work in the harbour, Nouna was not on the pier ; but as George took his place with the rest he found, roughly cut with a knife or some other sharp instrument in one of the large stones, the letters filled in with red chalk, these words :

“ I have been quite good all the time. Good-bye. N.”

It was his wife's last message to him. George knelt down and put his lips upon the stone. He had forgotten that he was not alone, but if he had remembered, it would have made no difference. The waves might wear out next tide the feebly scrawled marks which perhaps no eye but his could decipher, or the words might be read by every man, woman and child in the town—it was all the same to him now ; they were engraved upon his own heart, a complete, a holy answer to every doubt which had ever troubled him, to every aspiration he had ever had for the young life he had bound to his own. Love and sorrow had sanctified her ; there was no danger for his darling now.

The man, on the other hand, had only his worst feelings intensified by misfortune which he could not but look upon as unmerited. George's love for his wife remained as strong as ever, but it was now the one soft spot in a nature rapidly hardening under the influence of a struggle with fortune in which he had been signally worsted. In the long hours of the night, when his cough kept him awake even though he was tired out by a hard day's labour, he brooded over the wrongs he had suffered, until the canker of disappointment ate into his heart and bred there a burning, murderous wish for revenge : not upon the French law which had condemned him, as he maintained, unjustly—that was impersonal, intangible, a windmill to fight ; not upon the Colonel, who had faltered in his friendship ; not upon Chloris, whose mischievous caprice had set in motion the force which had indirectly destroyed him ; but a man's indignant righteous revenge upon the rascal who had tried from his very wedding-day to come between him and his wife. George began to feel that it was even more for the sake of finding Rahas than of meeting Nouna again that he yearned with a sick man's longing to live until the time of his release, and prayed for strength to drag on an existence which with its hopelessness and its morbid cravings for

the savage excitement of vengeance, was an infernal torment which told, by its intensity, on his waning strength.

The prison authorities noticed the change in him, and treated him with what little consideration was possible. The old priest, in particular, stirred by the fact that "number 42" was a heretic into giving him something better than the conventional doses of religious advice which he administered to the devotees of "the true Church," proved a most kind friend to him, and it was with a manner of sincere and warm sympathy that the good father while paying him his usual visit one day in April, let fall at parting a mysterious whisper about good news and good friends who had not forgotten him. The brooding prisoner hardly heeded him. But next morning he was brought up before the governor, and a paper was formally read out to him, in which he was informed that the Minister of the Interior, on having brought under his notice the case of the Englishman, George Lauriston, now undergoing a sentence of penal servitude at Toulon, had come to the conclusion that the said sentence was unduly severe, and that, as the evidence went to show that the crime was unpremeditated, and committed under strong provocation, a short term of imprisonment would have been adequate punishment, and that, in view of the fact that the said George Lauriston had been already at Toulon working as a convict for nearly four months, the Minister had decided to remit the remainder of the allotted term of imprisonment. George listened, but he hardly understood; the governor, in a few kindly words, then told him that he was a free man, that he could go back to his friends.

"Friends!" echoed George in a dull voice.

"Come, you cannot deny that you have friends; it is to some of them that you owe the good news you have just received," said the governor. "I understand they are in the town waiting to meet you. Sir Henry—something I do not recollect, is the name of the gentleman; and the lady——"

A light broke over George's face; he spoke some broken words of thanks in a more human voice.

That evening he was a free man, and was holding, dazed and trembling as with palsy, on one side the hand of Sir Henry Millard, on the other that of his daughter Ella.

CHAPTER XXX.

GEORGE had not known until this meeting with his old friends how much ill-health and confinement had pulled him down. He scarcely dared to look at Ella, for there came a lump in his throat whenever his eyes fell on her brave, steadfast face. Sir Henry's presence was a great relief to them both. The baronet's comments on the situation was so inapposite, and he had such a strong sense that he was rendered ridiculous by this journey to France to chaperon his daughter in her efforts on behalf of another woman's husband, that he gave them something to laugh at when they were only too ready to cry. Ella was as practical as ever.

"What are you going to do?" asked she, drawing George aside with her usual *brusquerie* when the first greetings were over.

"I am going to find Nouna," said he. "She has been here, and she went away ill a fortnight ago; I have found that out, and that her black servant Sundran was with her. I must start to-night."

"You are too ill for the journey."

"I am too ill to stay here. I have some work to do in England besides."

"What work?"

He did not answer, and there was a pause, during which she considered him attentively.

"George," she said at last in a low voice, "you are changed. You have lost the 'good' look you used to have. The work you speak of is something unworthy of you."

"It must be something very degrading then; you forget I am a——"

She stopped him imperatively.

"You are my ideal of an Englishman, as honest as any

and not so stupid as some. If you hadn't been unlucky, I should never have told you so, but now that you know what a surpassingly lofty opinion I have of you, I expect you to live up to it."

"You must let me be human though."

"That depends. There is good and bad humanity. What do you want to do?"

"I want to—well—I want to—get at that scoundrel Rahas!"

"You may—on one condition."

"Well?"

"You musn't lay a hand on him until you have seen Nouna."

George looked at her wonderingly.

"Tell me why you make that condition."

Her answer came at once in a full, deep, steady voice, that betrayed even more than her words did.

"Because I know that the sight of a face one loves and has longed to see can extinguish all hatred and anger, everything but happiness; just as your coming to-night has calmed down all my wicked feelings towards my uncle and towards—your poor little wife. I can forgive you for marrying her now—for the first time."

George was thunderstruck. All the passionate intensity with which the small, plain girl had loved him and longed for his success in life, had compassionated him and worked to retrieve his errors, blazed in her black eyes and seemed to cast a glow over her sallow face. Men are so much accustomed by reason and experience to associate women's fragility of frame with frivolity of mind, that any sudden discovery of devoted singleness of purpose in one of the soft and foolish sex strikes them into as much distant awe and reverent worshipfulness as a manifestation of godhead in the flesh would do. So that George remained quite silent before Ella, with no inclination to thank her, but a strong impulse to fall on his knees.

After nearly a minute's silence, she said, in the same deep voice:

"Will you promise me to see her first?"

George looked at her in a sidelong, shamefaced way.

"I will promise anything in the world you like," he said huskily.

She smiled happily, and taking his hand, made him sit

down beside her. The joy of having procured his release had thrown her this evening into an exaltation of feeling which banished her usual awkwardness, and made her unreserved as only a shy person unusually moved can be.

"Remember," she said, "you have to save yourself up for a journey." And she turned upon him the motherly look which shines out in the tenderness of all the best women.

Ella was perfectly happy this evening, and had not an atom of jealousy that the thoughts of the man, in whose interest she could forget all scruples of prudery, were bent on another woman. She had done for him what his wife could not do ; there was pride enough in that knowledge. There had been from the first so little selfishness in her love that by this time there was none—a not uncommon beauty of character in the plain of person who, expecting nothing, are more than content with a little. So she arranged all the details of the journey, and within a couple of hours she and her father and George were on their way back to England.

They did not reach London until the second morning after their departure from Toulon. George was disgusted and alarmed to find that he could scarcely stand ; but he resisted the suggestion that he should take a day's rest, being afraid that if he once yielded to his bodily weakness, it would be a long time before he was able to get about again. So he left Ella and her father at the hotel where they put up, and drove to Mary Street to learn whether Rahas still lived there. This step he took with Ella's full knowledge ; he should fulfil his promise, he told her, and keep his hands off the Oriental merchant until after he had found Nouna ; but he must set about his search in his own way.

No. 36, Mary Street looked the same as ever, except that, during the eleven months which had passed since George first drove up to the door and dashing up the dingy staircase came suddenly upon an *Arabian Nights'* nook in murky London, the lower windows had acquired a thicker coating of grime, and the board with the names "Rahas and Fanah" had lost its freshness of new paint ; the brass vases and lanterns, the Arabian gun, the inlaid table, the Indian figures were still there, and the fact that the firm did not depend upon the chance custom of passers-by was more patent than ever.

George stumbled as he got out of the hansom, and felt,

almost without seeing, for the bell. Fatigue, weakness, and the sleeplessness caused by intense excitement had preyed upon his body and stimulated his imagination till on this, the first day of his return to his own country, he was like a man walking in his sleep, and saw faces and heard voices invisible and inaudible to all but him. Nouna, as he saw her first, sleeping like a fairy princess, amidst gorgeous surroundings; the strange doctor, whose warning against the girl's dangerous charms rang again in his ears; the dark-faced Rahas and his pretensions to occult powers—all these recollections chasing each other through his feverishly excited mind, dulled his faculties to the cold reality of present experience, and when the door was opened by a woman whose face was unknown to him, he stood before her stupidly, without realising that it was he who had summoned her. When she asked him what he wanted, he pulled himself together, and asked if Rahas, the merchant, still lived there.

"Yes, he lives here, but he ain't here to-day; he's gone to Plymouth, and won't be home for a week or so. You can see the old gentleman if you like, or letters are sent to him."

Plymouth! The name sent an old suggestion into George's mind. He suddenly remembered that Miss Glass, the old servant of his family who had given Nouna shelter between her leaving Mary Street and her wedding-day, came from Plymouth, where her parents had kept a lodging-house. He had never doubted that he should find Nouna easily, and now he knew in a moment, without further reasoning, that she was at Plymouth, and that Rahas had gone down to see her there. So sure did he feel, that he did not even call at Miss Glass's house in Filborough Road to make inquiries; but obtaining from the servant at No. 36 the final information that Rahas had not long started, George jumped hastily back into his hansom and drove to Paddington. He found he had just missed the 11.45 train, and there was not another till three o'clock; so he drove to Waterloo, and learning that there was a train at 2.30, he resolved to go by that in order to be on the road as soon as possible, although it arrived no earlier than the three o'clock express from Paddington. This left him time to go back to the Charing Cross Hotel to say good-bye to his friends.

Whether she was frightened by the thought of a possible collision between George in his weakness and the

unprincipled Arabian, or whether she was stung by a feeling of jealousy that the time of her generous devotion to him was over, her work done, Ella grew ghastly pale on hearing of his intended journey, and tried to dissuade him from it. When she found him immovable, she endeavoured to induce her father to go with him ; but both the men laughed this suggestion to scorn, and the most she could obtain was permission for her and her father to see him off at the station.

George was absorbed, as he stood at the window of the compartment in which he was to travel, by a strong feeling of gratitude towards the young girl on the platform below him, in whose eyes he read a steady, unwavering friendship and affection, free from the advancing and receding tide of passion, without coquetry, without caprice, the noblest love a human creature can give, the one also which in either sex is sure never to have an adequate return. George looked down at her pale face reverently, and tried to find some words to express the overflowing feelings inspired by her goodness to him ; but she would not hear. Stepping back from the carriage-door with a blush, she affected to interest herself in the rest of the passengers, when suddenly the flush died away from her face, and she came hastily back. Looking up at George with an expression of strong anxiety, she said in a whisper :

“George, for Heaven’s sake be careful ; I believe the man himself is in the next carriage !”

Lauriston, much startled, his face lighting up, tried to open the door : but she stopped him saying : “Remember—your promise !”

The next moment the train had started, and George, overcome by the rush of feelings evoked by the thought that the man whom he hated was so near to him, sank down into his corner seat in the wet white heat which strong excitement causes to the bodily weak. He hoped that Rahas, if indeed it was he whom Ella had seen, had not caught sight of him ; in that case George was sure that he had only to follow the wily Arabian to be taken straight to the house where Nouna was. The journey seemed endless ; he fell from time to time into fits of stupor, in which he heard the tramp of the warder through the rattle of the train, and Nouna calling to him in hoarse, broken accents unlike her own, and a rasping voice shrieking out to the beat of the wheels : “Never to meet ! Never to meet !” With a start

he would find that prison-walls and darkness had melted back into the cushioned carriage and the light of day, and remember in a vague, half-incredulous way that he was on his way to Nouna. Then the train would stop at a station, and he would look out eagerly, furtively, scanning the passengers who got out, searching for the man he wanted. At last, at Salisbury, where the train waited a quarter of an hour, his anxiety was set at rest. Wrapped in a long overcoat, and wearing a travelling-cap pulled low over his eyes, Rahas descended to the platform, walked two or three times up and down with his eyes on the ground as if in deep thought, and got in again without having given one glance at any of the other compartments. George had felt pretty safe from recognition, as he was much altered by illness and the loss of his moustache, and as, moreover, he was believed to be still a prisoner in France. Now he was altogether sure that Rahas was off his guard, and the knowledge gave him confidence. When, therefore, the Oriental merchant left the train at a little station a few miles from Plymouth, George only allowed him time to get through the door before he jumped out after him, and turning up his coat-collar, as the coolness of the evening gave him an excuse for doing, gave up his ticket and followed.

Once out of the station, Rahas, without a glance behind him, struck straight across the fields by a narrow path that led to the distant light of what George supposed must be some little village. It was half-past eight; the showers of an April day had saturated the grass, and a thick damp mist lingered among the trees, most of which as yet had but a thin spring covering. The moon had not yet risen, and George had to hurry after Rahas, fearing in the obscurity to lose sight of him altogether. The numbness which had seized his tired faculties from time to time on the railway journey now again began to creep over him, so that the surprise he would at another time have felt, the questions he would have asked himself as to the merchant's leaving the train before he came to Plymouth, now merged into a dull confusion of ideas, the most prominent of which was that Rahas was trying to escape him. As the path descended into a little valley dark with trees, and the figure before him, now indistinct against the dark background, disappeared over a stile into the shadows of the copse beyond, this fancy grew stronger and, feeling that his limbs were unsteady with

ever-increasing fatigue, which made him hot and wet from head to foot, he broke into a run, reached the stile in his turn, got over it, and stumbling over some unseen obstacle, slipped on the soft, muddy earth, and fell to the ground. The next moment he felt himself seized as he lay on his face, bound with a stout cord that cut into his flesh in his struggles to free himself, and then dragged through brambles and wet grass into the little wood. This last was a slow operation, for George was a big man, and though no longer in the full vigour of his health, he was too heavy for his dead weight to be pulled along with ease. He lay quite still, without uttering a sound, recognising, after a valiant but vain attempt to get free, that he was quite at the mercy of his assailant, he decided that entire passivity was his best chance of escaping such a quieting as would save him all further exertion. The first result of this was that Rahas, when he had continued his slow and tedious progress with his victim for what seemed a long time, stopped and peered into his face closely enough for George to make quite sure of his identity. To his surprise, the Oriental seem quite relieved to find that he was not dead.

"Ah ha, you know me," he muttered, as he encountered the shining of living eyes in the gloom. "You are not hurt. That is all right. I do not want to hurt you, be sure of that. I bear you no ill-will."

"Thank you," said George quietly. "That is satisfactory as far as it goes ; but I should like to know whether this is the manner in which you treat chance acquaintances, for example."

"No," answered Rahas, quite simply ; "I am forced to this last means of keeping you from the woman whom Heaven, as the planets declare, has given to me, and whom you have ruined by instilling into her your own soul, which is killing her fair body day by day. Do you understand ? Her mother has given her to me, is only waiting for me to take her away to give her the dower you, in your proud folly, refused. I have waited long, I have tried many ways, to get what Allah intended for me. Nouna herself, weary of waiting, dying by inches, has at last given me permission to see her. Must I, at the last, with success in my very grasp after a year of waiting, see it wrung from me by the man whose touch has been fatal to this fair flower of the East ? No. The will of Allah must be done. There are

women enough in the world for you ; there is only one for me. Nouna must come to my arms to-night ; and for you, after to-night, I am at your disposal in any way you please."

There was a strange mixture of cupidity, fanaticism and ferocious courage in his speech and manner which struck horror into George's heart, at the thought that his wife might to-night have to come face to face, without a husband's protection, with this man. He uttered a loud shout and made a sudden effort to rise, which the Arabian frustrated with a movement as nimble as a hare's, accompanied by a short laugh.

"Keep still," he said more harshly, "and keep your shouting until I am out of earshot."

He made no threat in words, but his tone was so significant that George, to whom danger had restored his full faculties, resolved to save up his lungs. In a business-like manner Rahas then, with his knee on the young man's chest, assured himself that the cord which bound him was secure, and with a civil and dispassionate "good-night," to which the Englishman was in no humour to respond, he turned and walked rapidly away ; his steps scarcely sounded on the soft, damp earth, and only the crackle of dead branches and the rustle of living ones, growing fainter and fainter until the sounds faded quite away, told George that he was retreating rapidly.

Then came a time for the poor fellow when he prayed for death at last. With the rotting leaves of the previous autumn forming a slimy pillow for his head, his body sinking slowly into the damp earth, while a rising wind moaned a low dirge among the surrounding hills and swept over the thinly-leaved branches above his head with a sepulchral "hush !" he felt all the horrors of the grave, all its loneliness, all its impotence, without the one blessing—peace, which we hope for there in spite of the clergy, who are ferocious as regards the next world to counterbalance their meekness in this. The deft Rahas had bound him sailor-fashion, beginning with the middle of the rope ; and the knots were immovable as iron ; he began to feel cramped and benumbed by the cold, the rising moisture amid the undergrowth of the wood, and the impeded circulation of his blood. Still his head remained hot as fire, his brain reeling in a mad dance of fantastic tortures, until at last frenzy came, and pictures of the past

chased each other through his memory, but with a lurid light of horror upon them which distorted his fairest recollections, and turned them into ugly nightmares. Then in turn the pictures faded and his senses began to grow dull, and strange cries to sound in his ears to which he tried to reply ; but his voice would not come, and even as his lips moved in this effort, the last gleam of sense left him, and he fell into unconsciousness.

As upon the blackness of night the fair, pure dawn comes gradually, so George, from the stupor of a deadly lethargy, woke by slow degrees to sensations of warmth, and light, and joy ; and feeling, before the sense of sight came back to him, a soft touch on his flesh that set him quivering, and a breath against his lips that exhaled the very perfume of love, he fancied in the first moments of a still feebly moving brain, that his prayer had been granted, that he was dead, and in Heaven. Until suddenly there burst upon his ears a wild, joyous cry : " He is breathing ! He has come back to me—back, thank God ! thank God ! "

And his heart leapt up, and an ember of the old fire warmed his veins. Opening his eyes, which were blinded and dazzled still, he whispered huskily, " Nouna, my little wife ! " and groped about with weak, trembling arms until she came to him, and lying down by his side, pressed her lips to his with warm, clinging kisses that carried a world of loyalty and love straight from her soul to his. Then, while he felt her soft mouth strained against his, he knew, all dazed and half benumbed as he still was, that a change had come upon her. It was not the restless butterfly kiss of a passionate caprice that she gave him, as in the old days when she would fly from his knee to the window and back again half a dozen times in five minutes ; it was not the embrace of sincere but timid affection she had learnt to give him when they lived their struggling life in Paris ; it was the seal of patient and faithful love satisfied at last. From that moment he had no questions to ask, no explanations to hear. What did it matter where he was, how he came there, how she came there ? But Nouna, drawing her head back to look at him, saw his lips move, and she watched them and listened, holding her breath, to his weak whisper :

" Cold, darkness, pain, and the long windy nights—all over now ! "

And he drew her closer to him, and fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXXI.

NEXT morning, when rest had restored him to a wider interest and curiosity, George learnt the missing details of his adventure, and the circumstances which had led to the journey of Rahas.

On finding that the pretext of her mother's illness, upon which she had been enticed to England, was a false one, Nouna, who now mentioned the once loved name with averted eyes, but without any other token of her suspicions, had felt guilty and uneasy about her husband ; and as she did not hear from him she slipped away one night to find the house of Miss Glass, of whose kindness to herself and fondness for George she retained a warm recollection. As she felt ill and had no money, it was easy to guess how strong must have been the feelings which prompted her to leave her mother's house.

"If I could not be with you, I wanted to be with some one who knew you and was fond of you, and would help me to get back to you, George," she explained.

She had trusted to luck to find her way from Eaton Square to Kensington, and had been too much frightened to ask for direction. At last however, when she was so tired and despondent that she had sat down on a doorstep and begun to cry, a policeman had spoken to her, and on learning that she had no money, that she wanted to get to Filborough Road, that she was not sure of the number, but that she had friends there, he asked her whether she thought she could find the house if she were in the street, and suggested that she should take a cab, and ask her friends to pay for it. He had then hailed a hansom and put her into it, she had found the house without much difficulty, and Miss Glass had taken her in and nursed her carefully through a long illness which followed her rash adventure.

At this point of her story poor Nouna broke down in tears, reminded of a disappointment which had cut her to the heart. "And—my baby—never came after all," she whispered in a broken voice, with her head hung down in pathetic shame; "and I thought it was a punishment because I came away without asking you, and I thought you were offended and would never forgive me, because when I wrote to Paris to tell you I was sorry and ill, and begging you to come, I got no answer. For I did not know you were in prison, Miss Glass would not let me know. It was not until weeks later, when—my mother found out where I was, and told me she had seen you, that I knew, and that I said I must come to you. So they let me go, with Sundran, to Paris; and first they said you were at Poissy, and I went there and asked to see you, and there they said perhaps you were at Toulon. So we went to Toulon, and I wrote to the governor, and he said I could see you in two months. I felt I could not live all that time, and I was wondering what I could do to see you, when the great storm came and damaged the harbour, and they said some of the convicts would repair it. And my heart seemed to give a great bound, for I felt that my wish had come true like that. So I crept down to the harbour and slipped quietly along to the place where the stones were washed away, and waited until I saw you. When the second day you spoke to the warder-man and told him to send me away, I did not mind, for I knew by your face you were not angry; so next morning I wrote a message to you on the stone where you were working, and Sundran brought me back to England, for I was getting ill again, and she was afraid I should die there. And Miss Glass said I must go to the south where it was warm, and she sent me to Plymouth to her parents, and they are very kind and good to me."

"And did you let that wretch Rahas come and visit you?" asked George in a puzzled voice.

"I will tell you. I got a letter from him a few days ago, saying he was going to France, and if I pleased, he could take a letter from me to you, and let me see you, if I was anxious, as he used to let me see—my mother. I had only to say yes, and he would come down to Plymouth. I hated him for deceiving me and bringing me to England, but he declared in his letter that was my mother's doing. And I was so hungry for some news of you that I wrote

Yes, he might come. Then I could not keep still for impatience : he telegraphed to me to meet the train he came by, and I went to the station, and when I found he hadn't come by it, I described him to the guard, and he said a dark gentleman like that had left the train two stations before. There's a big boy at the house where I'm staying who does whatever I like, and I had made him come to the station because I was afraid of meeting Rahas alone. And I told him to take tickets for him and me, and we went back by the next train to the station where Rahas got out. The porter said two gentlemen had got out and gone across the fields ; and I knew who the other one was, and I screamed, and told William my husband had come back. But he said it was a fancy. We walked across the wet fields in the dark, and I was trembling so that I could scarcely stumble along, and William carried a lantern, and said I had better go back, for we were on a wild-goose chase. And when we came down to the wood, my foot slipped, and I fell on to the grass, and as he stooped to pick me up, William saw marks on the ground, as if something had been pulled along over it. He went a little way slowly until I heard him give a cry, and I ran to him, and —and we found you."

She could not say more, her voice was suffocated, her lips were shaking. But the whitewashed walls of the room in which he was lying, the hayrick he could see through the window, told George that it was to a farmhouse he had been brought ; and there they spent two days, until he was well enough to get up and go with Nouna back to her friends in Plymouth. Then began for them both in the pretty southern town a new and sweeter honeymoon, marred only for each by a secret fear for the other. In the first days of their re-union happiness gave their wasted frames a new vitality which made each feel on the high road to health, but which made to each only the more evident the pale face and heavy breathing of the other.

They were sitting together in the sunlight one May afternoon, the window wide open, the breeze coming in straight from the sea, drinking in the joy of each other's presence as they were never tired of doing, when George passed his hand slowly down his wife's cheeks, and shivered.

"Are you cold?" she asked anxiously, nestling up to him

and putting her little arms round him as if to protect him from the spring air.

"No," he said in a troubled voice, "I'm all right. But I'm afraid this place doesn't suit you, Nouna; you're getting so thin and white. You are paler than when I came back."

Nouna's face changed; after a moment's pause she sprang up with her old vivacity, and running to a looking-glass, gazed at her own reflection for some minutes, and then crept back to her husband's side with a bright light in her eyes. As he looked at her inquiringly, she drew up the sleeve of his coat as far as she could, very gently, and then baring her own arm also, laid it beside his, and glanced up into his face with an odd, tender, yearning expression which, after a moment's wonderment, opened his own dull eyes. For a few seconds neither spoke again. Then he snatched her into his arms and their eyes held each other's for some minutes in an ecstasy of relief and gratitude. George had loved his wife better than his career, better than his own happiness. Nouna, since the fall of her first idol—her mother—had turned all her devotion to the husband who had cherished her so tenderly. Both, therefore, dreaded life without the other a thousand times worse than death, and when it dawned upon them that they were not to be parted again, there was no further sorrow possible for them in this world.

"George," said Nouna at last, in a broken whisper, "if you had never met me you would have been much happier, for you would have married that good Ella and have got on in the world and become a great man."

"Yes," said he at once.

"Well, aren't you sorry?"

"No."

"Why?"

It was not easy to explain. The sailor, sinking with his ship at twenty-five, does not in his last moments wish that he had been a grocer, though if he had he might have gone on contentedly selling tea and candles for half a century. George, struck down by misfortune in the prime of his youth, had tasted some of life's supremest joys, and the rolling years could give him no delight such as he had felt in running the whole gamut of an absorbing passion. He hesitated before he answered her.

"If I had not married you," he said at last, "you would never have been poor, you would have had as many lovely dresses and diamonds as you wanted, and nobody would ever have teased you to tell the truth, or to do anything you didn't want to do. And yet you are not sorry you married me. What's the reason?"

She curled herself about him. "I don't know," she said shyly. "You've made me feel things I didn't—feel—before."

"Well, Nouna, and you've done the same to me. Are you satisfied?"

"Yes," she said.

"Then so am I."

And in this state of placid but languid contentment these two shipwrecked creatures drifted on day by day, tired out by the buffets of fortune, and making no effort to escape from the black archer who seemed to have marked them down. The young come to this stage more easily than the middle-aged; when their strong passions and eager desires burn low, quenched suddenly by ill-health or desperate misfortune, all the busy wheels of the world seem to stand still with them, and they cry, when they feel that the pulse of life beats weakly: "This is the end!" While older sufferers, who have shaken Time by the hand, and know his ways, and have learnt to bear his penalties patiently, see only the daily work interrupted against their will, waiting to be taken up again when the storm is over.

There came to Plymouth, when Lauriston and his wife had been a week there together, a friend who saw something of this, and set her wits to work, after her custom, to put right what she saw was wrong. Ella Millard had brought her whole family to the town on the plea that a fortnight of the Devonshire air would improve her sisters' complexions, and arm them for the triumphs of the coming season. Having gained over her mother, from whom she inherited her own strong will, the rest yielded like lambs, and within a week of her resolution to come they were all installed in a house at the upper end of Lockyer Street, near the Hoe. By Sir Henry and his two eldest daughters, who all enjoyed a serene animal health, and to whose lymphatic temperament trials of the nervous system were meaningless words, the wan faces and languid movements of the Lauristons were looked upon as altogether fatal signs. But the more discriminating Ella

would not give up hope so easily. It seemed to her contrary to common sense, and to the lofty qualities she attributed to him that the man who had been her ideal should allow himself to be snuffed out of life so easily. Afraid to depend entirely upon her own judgment in such an important matter, she refrained from setting her scathing little tongue to jibe at him for the inertness of his mind until she had found some person of authority to pronounce upon the health of his body. But George had never before in his life been in need of a doctor, and scouted the idea of seeing one now ; while Nouna, on whose behalf Ella then pleaded, shrank sensitively from the ordeal of meeting a stranger, and only consented at last to see the physician whom George had called in to dress her arm on the memorable evening of his first visit to Mary Street. The very next day Dr. Bannerman arrived, and had an interview with both his patients. The entrance of the tall, slightly stooping figure, the sight of his dark, penetrating face, lean, lined, and impressive as that of a magician, raised a flush of excitement to Nouna's face, and brought back to her husband's mind a vivid recollection of the prophecy uttered by the doctor on that May evening. If the sharp eyed man of science knew all the circumstances that had chequered Lauriston's life since he disregarded that warning, he would indeed think that his sinister prophecy had been amply fulfilled.

The interview was a short one. The doctor affected to have no recollection of either of his patients until George followed him out of the room, and stood face to face with him on the landing.

"You remember me, doctor, I suppose," he said in a rather shamefaced way.

"Perfectly."

"The first time you met me you were kind enough to read me a sermon. You might read me one to more purpose now."

"More purpose ! No. You can read your own sermon now, and I come to my proper function, that of curing the results of the acts my warning could not save you from."

"If you knew the whole story, doctor, you would hardly blame me."

"I don't blame you. How can I blame conduct which brings me a patient ? If all men were wise, we poor medicine men might go sweep crossings."

"But, doctor, if I had been a wiser man I should have been a worse one."

"Not necessarily. And it shows no more virtue than wisdom to throw up the sponge when you are beaten by Fortune at the first round."

George reddened. "First and last round too, isn't it, doctor? Come, tell me honestly how long you give me to live."

Dr. Bannerman looked at him steadily.

"If you remain mooning about here, hovering along like a moth in the sunshine, brooding over things which are past and beyond remedy, I give you a year. If you buckle to, make yourself new interests in life, start on a new career, and get new air into your lungs and new thoughts into your brain, I give you any time from ten years to five-and-twenty."

George instinctively drew himself up into a more martial attitude.

"And my wife?" he asked with fresh interest and eagerness.

"I give her as long as she has a strong heart and a brave arm to take care of her."

The young man turned his eyes away with a new light burning in them. At last he said with a tremor in his voice:

"You would not deceive us about this, of course, just to keep us lingering on a little longer?"

"Not a bit of it. You are both suffering from severe shock to the nervous system, and because each of you thought you were going to lose the other, neither has had the energy or the desire to pull round. You besides have a weak lung, and I tell you frankly you would not make her majesty such a smart young officer again. But a man of your intelligence must have other resources."

George saw by the foregoing speech that very little of his history during the past year was unknown to the doctor. On the whole, this knowledge made him feel easier.

"I think I could write," said he reflectively. "I have already given myself some sort of training for it, and if only all my ideas did not seem to be locked up somewhere out of my reach, I think I could express them at least intelligibly."

"Good," said Dr. Bannerman. "Then all we have to

do is to find the key. I think I know a friend of yours whom we can consult about that. You shall hear the result of our conference very shortly. In the meanwhile, keep up your spirits and keep out of draughts, and English literature may yet thank your wife for taking you out of the army."

George shook his hand warmly, and the doctor left the house. Half way down Lockyer Street he met Ella Millard, who was burning with impatience to know the result of the interview. As he came up she hastily dismissed a fair-haired young fellow of three or four and twenty, who trotted meekly off at once towards the Hoe. She was too deeply interested in what the doctor had to tell to utter more than the word "Well!" in a tremulous voice. She thought, however, by the expression of his face that his news could not be very bad.

"Well!" he repeated after her.

"Is it well?" said she impatiently.

The doctor smiled. "I think so."

Her face softened. "I thought it could not be the worst; it would have been too dreadful—and too foolish," she added sharply.

"That is just what I told him. Oh! I was very hard with him; I thought he wanted it. He has had an awful time of it lately, and the poor boy hardly knows even yet whether he is on his head or his heels. But it is quite time now that he made an effort to pull himself together. I gave him a good talking to, I can tell you."

Her look seemed to implore mercy, but she said nothing. He continued: "They ought to go away. He thinks he could write, and I should encourage him to try."

"And—his wife?" she asked, with a scarcely perceptible diminution of interest.

"There is nothing organically wrong with her at all. She will be herself again before him, and then help his recovery."

"*Help* him! Do you think so?" asked Ella doubtfully.

"Yes."

"I thought you told me, that when you first saw her she produced on you a very different impression."

"So she did. But then—she was a very different woman."

Ella's mouth twitched rather scornfully. She thought that the weird prettiness of Nouna's little wasted face had bewitched even this middle-aged doctor.

"She is scarcely even yet an ideal companion for a man of intellect," she said with a slight touch of her worst, most priggish manner.

"H'm, I don't know," said the doctor. "Your man of intellect is generally a man of something else besides; and the housekeeper-wife and the blue-stockings wife both frequently leave as much to be desired as—well, say, the flower-wife, if once the flower learns to turn to the sun, as, I think, little Mrs. Lauriston has done."

"She is fond of him," agreed Ella rather grudgingly.

"And what more does he ask of her?"

"Nothing more now; but will it be always so?"

"Who can tell? But love on both sides is a good matrimonial foundation. Have they any money?"

"Enough to live upon as quietly as they are doing now."

"Ah! but they want something more than that. He ought to move about, to travel, and she ought to be tempted back to interest in life with some of the pretty things she is so fond of. Haven't they any relations who could manage that?"

Ella's face brightened with a little smile as she nodded assent. "I think the relations can be found," she said.

Apparently the doctor thought he had put the suggestion into good hands, for he looked at her very good-humouredly as he held out his hand and bade her good-bye.

"The gentleman who was dismissed for me will be wishing me all the nauseous draughts I ever prescribed," said he drily.

Ella grew superbly disdainful.

"Oh no," she cried with haughty emphasis. "He is only a silly young fellow who was a fellow-officer of Mr. Lauriston's, and who is so fond of him that he has come down here on purpose to see him, although he puts off doing so from day to day for fear of waking in him recollections which might distress him."

The doctor was more than satisfied with this elaborate explanation.

"I dare say he manages to fill up his time agreeably enough—in this pleasant neighbourhood," said he gravely.

And he raised his hat and left her before she had time to utter another protest.

Now, quite unintentionally, Dr. Bannerman had done a very ill turn to a most harmless and kindly fellow-mortal.

Clarence Massey, the humble companion whom he displaced at Ella's side, having been attracted to Ella by the devotion with which she had worked for his friend George Lauriston, had raised up an altar to her in his most affectionate and warm heart, on which, figuratively speaking, he burned incense all day long. Whenever and wherever she would let him, he followed like a dog, bearing her snappish fits with beautiful meekness, accepting any remarks she liked to throw to him, as precious pearls to be treasured in his memory ; gentle, loyal, and devoted always. Ella, who had begun by laughing at him, had been thawed by his distracted anxiety and misery over George Lauriston's misfortunes, until from tolerating she had begun to like him. And now, just as she was getting so amiable to him that he had begun to entertain hopes which he had the sense and modesty to think extravagant, this light suggestion on the part of a stranger chilled her into anger at the thought that any one should think her capable of a serious thought for so unintellectual a person as Clarence Massey.

She had promised, on Doctor Bannerman's approach, to rejoin Clarence on the Hoe ; but it was with the step of an offended empress that the plain little girl met this well-provided young fellow, on whom a dozen mammas of marriageable daughters now fixed longing eyes.

"Well, what does he say?" asked Clarence, afraid from the expression of her face that the report was bad.

She told him briefly and coldly the substance of the doctor's opinion, but without any hint of his last suggestion except the vague information that the pair had better go abroad. Then she walked briskly on in the direction of the Fort, and to Clarence's meek request for permission to accompany her, she gave the most brusque, most chilling answer that he could "do as he pleased." Of course he pleased to go, and when they got on to the narrow footpath which is only wide enough for one, he followed with tears in his eyes at the change in her, wondering what in the world had happened to make her so unkind to him. Meanwhile, however, an idea had come into her busy little head which helped the effect of the spring air in restoring her to good humour ; so that when she stopped to look reflectively out to sea and caught sight of his disconsolate face, she smiled at him with mingled mercy and majesty and asked him why he looked so miserable.

"I'm not miserable now," said he, brightening up at once. "It was only that I was afraid you didn't want me."

Ella grew prim again.

"It is very kind of you to come," said she.

"Ella, don't say that. How can you say that, when you know very well how happy it makes me to be with you!"

"Happy! How absurd! I wish, Clarence, you wouldn't say such ridiculous things."

"But Ella, why is it ridiculous? It's true, you know it's true. You know very well I would follow you to the end of the world if you'd let me, that I'd do anything you wanted me to, that I'm never so happy as when I'm with you. Well, why is it ridiculous to say what is true and what you know?"

"But I don't want to know it," said Ella sharply. "If I had thought you would ever talk to me in such a silly way I would never have let you come out with me. When I'm thinking about serious things, too!"

"Can't you see that this is serious to me?"

"It's only all the more ridiculous. You must either promise never to talk such nonsense to me again, or you must give up the walks."

"Very well, then, I must give up the walks," said Clarence resignedly, "for I can't make the promise."

And he walked away over the rough grass, and began to look out to sea on his own account. Ella, in spite of the "serious things" which had occupied her thoughts, was forced to turn her attention to this importunate and foolish person close at hand, and she did so with a much graver countenance than was her wont in matters relating to him. The fact was that this unexpected threat of withdrawing his despised attentions woke her suddenly to the fact that she should miss them. Ella discovered all at once that she was not so insensible as she had imagined to the ordinary feminine pleasure in the possession of a devoted slave. Even a Clarence who occasionally talked nonsense would be better than no Clarence at all. Some expression of these conclusions found its way to her face, for the crest-fallen swain was emboldened by her glance to draw near her again. She said no kind word however, and he was afraid that further pleading at the moment might be injudicious, so they stood very quietly side by side until Ella broke out vehemently:

"I wish I had twenty thousand pounds!"

The wish and the fiery manner in which it was uttered took Clarence so completely by surprise that instead of assuring her that she had only to say the word, and he would lay that sum at her feet, as perhaps she had expected of the impulsive little Irishman, he only said simply :

"What for?"

"To throw into the sea," was her surprising answer.

He laughed, supposing that this was a faint sort of joke.

"I mean it," she added gravely. "I can get five thousand pounds of my fortune from papa, but I want twenty thousand more."

"But what a strange use for it; you are not in earnest about that!"

"Oh, yes, but I am."

"Well, if anybody were to offer you twenty thousand pounds, what would you say to—him?"

"I should say, Thank you."

"Prettily?"

Ella paused. He was bending his head to look into her eyes, and putting into that word a great deal of impertinent meaning. Then she flashed up into his face a grand glance full of magnificent haughtiness.

"Of course, because I am not handsome, you think I ought to jump at you!"

"Oh, no, I don't. But whether you jump at me or away from me, you shall have the twenty thousand pounds."

"What, without knowing what I am going to do with it?"

"You said you wanted it to throw into the sea."

"Oh, yes, yes, so I do. But supposing I were to throw it to another man—a *merman*, for example?"

Clarence winced. "Whatever you do is right, Ella," he said, at last. "You can throw it to whoever or whatever you like."

"When can I have it?"

"I shall have to go up to town. I can raise it by next week."

Ella put her hand on his arm impulsively.

"You're a good fellow," she said, in a very sweet voice.

And Clarence, who had never had such a mark of her favour before, felt all on fire, and wished he dared to hold her fingers where they had so unexpectedly placed themselves. But the overwhelming reverence he felt for this

small girl taught him discretion, and you might have thought, by the stiffness with which he held himself under her touch, that a wasp had settled upon him, and that he was afraid to move for fear of provoking it to sting. But they walked back together to the Hoe in a very amicable manner, Clarence feeling that luck had helped him to make a splendid move, and Ella wondering whether by the acceptance of twenty thousand pounds from a man she could be considered in any way to have compromised herself.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THREE weeks passed very quietly for George Lauriston and his wife without any markedly apparent result of the doctor's visit, except that George, trying to shake off the lethargy into which he had sunk since his imprisonment, had put himself into harness for a new battle with fortune by writing articles on the condition of the army for a local paper. He also took a journey to London to fulfil his long-promised revenge upon Rahas, and would probably have got himself into fresh trouble by using other than legal means of chastisement upon the Arabian, if that ingenious gentleman had not just got into a little difficulty with the excise officers over a large consignment of choice tobacco which was more than suspected of having paid no duty, and some silver goods not up to standard, the hall-mark on which had been forged, which forced him to leave the land of his adoption for shores where genius is more respected.

Both George and Nouna for a long time refrained from mentioning her mother's name, and it was with some emotion that they both recognised her handwriting one day outside a letter directed to the husband, the postmark of which was Bath. George took it away to read, and Nouna made no remark, but when he came back to her, holding it open in his hand, he found that she was trembling with intense excitement. She took it from him with a passionately anxious glance, but gathered comfort from his gravely smiling face.

Nouna then read these words :

"MY DEAR MR. LAURISTON,

"I am writing to make a request which I pray you will generously grant. I know there are differences between

us which would make another meeting undesirable and perhaps painful to both, I would not suggest that we should see each other again : but I implore you to let me see my daughter just once more. Six months ago I could have claimed this as a right, or I would have contrived it by a trick. But I have learnt to respect you, and I only ask. I am a different woman, I have grown old, I am changed, you would not mind her coming now—I swear it. Lord F. has been very generous, and I want nothing but just one more look at my daughter. Let her come and see the Condesa di Valdestillas, that is the name I bear here, and shall bear to the end of my life. A foreign title covers whatever of eccentricity is left in

“Yours very sincerely,

“LAKSHMI DI VALDESTILLAS.”

Nouna was crying quietly as she finished. She clung to her husband's arm.

“Must I go?” she whispered.

“Oh, yes,” said George promptly. “She has always loved you, Nouna ; I will write to tell her you are coming.”

“Oh, George, George,” panted the little creature in the same low voice, “I feel so wicked for not wanting to go ! But all my heart has turned to you now, and I can't get the old feeling back.”

He clasped his hands round her shoulders.

“But you will, Nounaday, you will have just the feeling that is right when you see her all by herself, lonely, waiting for you whom she has always loved better than anything in the world.”

All the sting had now gone out of his feelings towards the creature who, with all her odd mixture of coarseness and refinement, corruption and generosity, had lived to see the very virtues she had fostered in her child turn against her in the loneliness of her premature age. For George had learnt from Lord Floreencecourt, who ran down to Plymouth two or three times to see him and Nouna, to whom he was beginning to be reconciled, that Chloris White had indeed retired from her old life, broken up and suddenly middle-aged, and had fixed her retreat in the pretty old city of Bath, where she lived safe from recognition in a colony of what the Colonel irreverently called “old tabbies,” feeling neither contrition for the past nor discontent with the present, and passing her

time, with a serenity born of dulled faculties and worn-out energies, in petty charities and petty scandal.

Two days after the receipt of the letter George arrived with Nouna in Bath, left her at the door of her mother's residence, a small, well-kept house in a quiet street, and walked up and down outside until she should rejoin him. When she reappeared at the door she was very serious, and she beckoned him to come up the steps to her.

"Mamma wishes—to say—good-bye to you," she said in a tremulous voice.

Standing aside she let George see a bent figure, dressed in black, with greyish hair, and a wan dark face, who raised her great black burning eyes, but not with the old boldness, to his face. He took his hat off, and held out his hand. The lean little dark fingers she put into his were shaking.

"Good-bye, Mr. Lauriston. I shall not see you again. It has made me happy to see you. Remember when you think of me that I had no chance—from the beginning. But I kept my child pure, and so God sent you to her. I dare not bless you, but I thank you; if I were better I would pray for you. Good-night. Good-bye."

The long evening shadows were creeping over the quiet streets, as George and his wife, walking slowly away, caught the final glimpse of a pale, drawn face, and great eyes like flaming fires, straining in the gloom for a last look at them. Nouna was very quiet, but she was much happier than she had been in coming.

"George," she said in a low voice, "I can think about her and love her now just as I used to do. When may I see her again? She would not tell me."

And George could not tell her either, though he gave her a ready assurance that she should come whenever she was summoned; for he had a shrewd suspicion that, in spite of Lord Florencecourt's belief that she was happy and contented, the restless spirit of the reputed Countess was untaken still, and chafed in secret under the new bonds of broken health, changed habits, and disappointed ambition. Two days later this suspicion was confirmed, when he received the tidings, conveyed to him only, of the sudden end of the Condesa di Valdestillas, who had been found dead in her bed from an overdose of a sleeping-draught. But as she left a sealed letter for George with instructions to keep the news of her death from her daughter until

Nouna was stronger, full of passionate thanks to him, and equally passionate regrets that she might not leave what she possessed to her child, he was not deceived, though he was the only person who ever knew the secret.

Poor Sundran, who was with her mistress to the last, implored George, who went at once to Bath on learning the tidings, to let her come back to her darling Misse Nouna. And as he was sure enough now of his influence over his wife no longer to dread that of the black woman, he promised that, at no distant time, she should return to her service.

On hearing that the "Condesa di Valdestillas" was dead, Lord Florencecourt, finally relieved from his fears, openly acknowledged Nouna as his daughter "by a former wife," as indeed poor Chloris, thinking over the position of affairs on the eve of her first and last attempt at reparation, had foreseen that he would do, and settled a handsome allowance upon her. He came down to Plymouth in the last week of May to make this determination known to his son-in-law. He was accompanied by his niece Ella, who was in a state of strong but subdued excitement, but who gave no reason which her uncle could consider adequate for her entreaty that she might thus leave London for a few days in the height of the gaieties of the season.

On their arrival in Plymouth, Ella chose to remain alone at the hotel while the Colonel went to call upon the Lauristons. He thought this decision very extraordinary; but on his return a light came to him; for in the sitting-room, standing close by his niece's side, and bending over her to speak with a passionate earnestness which seemed to infect the usually self-contained girl, was Clarence Massey. They both started guiltily on Lord Florencecourt's entrance, and Clarence shook with nervousness as he greeted him. Ella rushed at her uncle, and asked about the health of the invalids with great vivacity and interest.

"What were you talking about when I came in?" asked the Colonel bluntly, when he had informed her that George and Nouna were neither better nor worse than they had been three weeks ago.

"We were talking about them—about the Lauristons," answered Ella.

And Clarence echoed her words. The Colonel looked from the one to the other incredulously. His niece seized both his hands impulsively, with a light-hearted laugh.

"We must tell you—it's a great secret, but it's coming out now, and you shall be the first to hear it," said she.

Then she made him sit down, and told him, rather breathlessly, a long story, to which Clarence played Chorus, and to which the Colonel listened with amazement, admiration, and something like consternation too.

"And who's to pay for it all?" he asked at last in bewilderment.

"Oh, we've arranged all that," said Ella airily.

Again Clarence echoed, "We've arranged all that."

And this astonishing unanimity naturally led Lord Florencecourt to a conclusion the expression of which would have filled Ella with the loftiest indignation. In the meantime, having been informed of the plot, he was pressed into the service of the conspirators, and that evening, when it had grown dark, they all three went to the house where the Lauristons were staying, and the Colonel entered, leaving the two young people to walk up and down outside in a state of breathless expectancy.

"Break it gently!" was Ella's last injunction as he left them.

Lord Florencecourt found his way up stairs to his son-in-law's sitting-room in a state of great nervousness. He found George and Nouna, pale, thin, and languid as ever, the former sitting at the table, writing, while his tiny wife, curled up on the sofa with a large ball of wool, some long wooden pins, and a small, misshapen piece of work which was the result of many evenings' labour, flattered herself that she was knitting. They were both surprised by this second visit from the Colonel, and by the fact that now he had come he seemed to have nothing to say.

"What are you doing?" he asked Nouna at last.

"I'm making George a comforter," she answered proudly. "I can't be idle while my husband's at work."

"Well, it keeps you quiet at any rate," he observed injudiciously, a glance at the comforter having convinced him that if ever it should be finished and worn it would belie its name. The Colonel fidgeted for a few moments, and the young people began to assume an attitude of expectancy, perceiving that something was to come of this unusual restlessness. "I suppose you wouldn't like to leave Plymouth—to go anywhere—to—India, for instance," he blurted out at last.

Nouna sprang up with a cry, a great light in her eyes. George's face flushed; he crossed the room and came to support his wife, who was tottering.

"Why does he say it? why does he say it? It can't be true, oh, it can't be true!" sobbed she, burying her face in his breast.

"What does it mean, Colonel? Are you serious?" asked George in a hoarse voice.

He hated England just now, sore and beaten down as he still felt, but he had felt that to run away from it was cowardly, even if he had been able to afford it. This suggestion of change for himself and joy for Nouna therefore came upon his heart like a ray of bright light in the dead grey level of their languid lives.

"Make all your preparations to-night," said the Colonel, "for you will have to start to-morrow."

And, as if afraid of committing himself by any explanation, he left the room, and darted out of the house like a lad before they had time to stop him. In the street Ella and Clarence met him, full of excitement.

"Well?" said they at the same time, both quivering with excitement.

"It's all right. I told them—just enough and no more. I said it rather suddenly perhaps, but I was afraid they'd ask questions. They're to be ready to start to-morrow, I said. You couldn't have managed better yourself, Ella. They were delighted, absolutely delighted."

The Colonel was right. To these two beings, whose hearts and minds were still scarcely as convalescent as their bodies after the trials of the preceding few months, the suggestion of this great change came as the grant of a new bright life to them. Nouna, in particular, was half crazy with delight, and seemed to recover in a moment all her lost vivacity, as she babbled of palms and sunshine, palaces with stately domes and graceful minarets, of elephants with rich trappings, birds with bright plumage, and dark depths of jungle where the tiger was known to lurk, and where every step was hedged with fascinating peril. That night she scarcely slept, and next morning, when Lord Florencecourt again made his appearance, accompanied this time by Ella, he was quite bewildered by the change in his daughter's looks. Ella herself, although very quiet, was almost as much excited, as she asked whether they were ready. George, with dull

masculine pertinacity, worried everybody by asking for details of the journey for which they had so hastily prepared ; but at last perceiving, by the evasive answers he got, that some surprise was intended, he was in the end content to hold his tongue, and to wait patiently till the proper time should bring enlightenment. Arrangements had been made, they were told, for the transport of their luggage, and they had nothing to do but to start in the company of Ella and the Colonel. They set out on foot, which was one astonishing thing, and they were taken in the direction of the Hoe, which was another. It was a beautiful, bright May morning. From the seat by the camera obscura they all stood for a moment, looking down at the water, when suddenly Nouna burst forth into a cry of admiration at the sight of a beautiful yacht which was anchored half-way between the shore and Drake's Island.

"When did it come?" she cried with much interest. "It wasn't here yesterday. What a beautiful little thing!"

"Little thing!" cried Lord Florencecourt, with untimely impetuosity. "Why it's 150 tons ; big enough to go round the world in !"

Then an awkward silence fell upon everybody, for, vulgarly speaking, the cat was out of the bag. And the conversation was kept up with difficulty until, descending the cliff, they all came to the little landing-pier, where a small boat was waiting with Clarence Massey standing up in it, waving his hat frantically and beaming with unspeakable enthusiasm. Neither George nor Nouna asked any questions now ; and they all got into the little boat in a state of surprising silence, and were rowed straight out towards the beautiful yacht without anybody's remarking upon the strangeness of the circumstance. But as they drew near her, Nouna caught sight of the name, painted in bright gold letters on the stern—"Scheherazade." She touched her husband's arm, and made him read it too. Before he could speak, they were close under the yacht, and Lord Florencecourt was leading the way on board. Nouna climbed up next like a cat, and the rest followed quickly.

Then Ella took the young wife by the hand, and, leaving the three men on the deck, led her on a tour of inspection. The yacht was a tiny floating palace, fitted up by the dainty taste of one woman to suit the luxurious fancy of another.

The rooms were hung with rich tapestry, and with delicate China silks embroidered in gold and pale colours. The woodwork was painted with birds and flowers on a background of faint grey landscape. The bed-room was fitted up with satin-wood, and hung with rose-coloured silk ; while in order that George might have a corner better suited to masculine taste in this dainty little craft, a very small room, dark with old oak and serviceable leather, had been appointed for him as a study. Every corner of the yacht held something beautiful and curious : skins of white bears, mounted in maroon velvet ; carvings in ivory, securely fixed on dark brackets that showed off their lacelike outlines ; treasures in bronze, in delicate porcelain, in exquisitely tinted glass from Salviati's, met the eyes at every turn. The whole furnishing and fitting of the little vessel, down to the choice of silver-gilt teaspoons from Delhi and a lamp which was said to have been dug up at Pompeii, had clearly been a labour of love.

Nouna was overwhelmed ; she walked along with her hand in Ella's, scarcely uttering a sound, until at last she heard the words whispered in her ear : "This is a present for you—all for you, with my love. You are to make good use of it, and be very happy in it. No"—she stopped Nouna, who was breaking into tears, and incoherent, passionate thanks—"you may thank me when you and your husband both come sailing back strong and rosy and well."

Nouna smiled at her with glistening eyes as she put her little hands round the girl's shoulders.

"I can't thank you, I can scarcely try. You were born to be a good fairy to everybody. Kiss me, kiss me hard, and give me some of your own sweetness that I may be a better wife."

When they came on deck again they were both very quiet ; and George, who had in the meantime learnt that this fairy yacht was a present to his wife, and also that, in common with the fairy presents of tradition, for a whole year at least it would entail no expense upon its owner, could do nothing but shake Ella's hand warmly and murmur some incoherent words.

All the visitors on board now felt that their task was done. The luggage was on board, the steam was up, the hands were ready to hoist the anchors ; and both George and Nouna showed signs of having suffered as much excitement as their

still weak frames could bear. Lord Florencecourt, Ella and Clarence took their leave quickly, descended from the yacht into the little boat, and rowed away in the sunshine, while the young husband and wife waved them good-bye.

"Where are we going to, George?" asked Nouna, when the little boat had reached the pier, and the passengers were landed.

"Just where you like. You are its mistress, you know."

She drew a long breath of pleasure.

"Tell the captain to go, as quickly as possible, to some place—nearer than India—where there are palms and blue skies, and bright birds."

George obeyed, and, coming back, told her that they were going first to Malta. She was satisfied, considering that Valetta was a pretty name, and remembering she had heard the air was good for people with weak lungs.

"Yes, yes, let us go to Malta, George, and there you will get well," said she.

And she drew him towards a pretty little pavilion which had been erected on the deck. The hanging curtains were crimson and gold, and could be looped back to command a view of the sea in any direction.

"Why didn't Ella take me in there?" she said.

"Perhaps it contains some great treasure which she kept as a *bonne bouche* at the last," suggested he, smiling.

Already she had an inkling of the truth, and when she tore back the nearest curtain and found, kneeling on the ground on a leopard's skin among white silken cushions which were to support her young mistress's head, the old servant Sundran trembling with joy, she gave way, and fell sobbing into the Indian woman's arms.

"Oh, George, George," she whispered passionately, springing up again to her husband's side, "Ella must have an angel from heaven hovering about her to whisper to her just what will make people happiest! Aren't you afraid of waking up and finding it isn't real?"

"No, Nounday," said he, tenderly, but with a thoughtful face; "I'd rather think that we have been in a dreary, feverish sleep, and that we are sent away to wake us up to life again!"

Ten minutes later the anchor was weighed, and they were steaming out towards the breakwater and the open sea.

Meanwhile Ella and Clarence had engaged a small, swift

boat to row them across to the foot of Mount Edgecumbe Park ; and climbing at a great pace up the steep road that skirts the walls, they got into the field below Maker Church to get a last glimpse of the yacht. They were in time to see clearly against the blue of sea and sky the bright-hued pavilion with its curtains thrown back, and a group of scarcely distinguishable figures underneath.

"Yes—yes, I can see them—I can see them, George and Nouna and Sundran, too !" said Clarence excitedly.

Ella was shorter-sighted, stamped her foot with impatience because she could not make them out, and was fain to be content with watching the yacht until it was a mere speck. At last she could scarcely see it, for her eyes grew dim with rising tears. Clarence had now time to feel angrily jealous of her interest in the vessel.

"Poor little girl ! Poor little Nouna !" she said at last. "How white and worn she looks still, so different from the brilliant little creature who came to us at Maple Lodge !"

"Perhaps she will die and leave him free," said Clarence rather bitterly.

But Ella's expression changed to one of sincerest anxiety.

"Oh, no, indeed I hope she won't ! It would break his heart !" she said.

"I thought you considered her such an inappropriate wife for him ?"

Ella reddened. She had thought so once, and she thought so no longer ; but when and how her thoughts and feelings on the subject had changed, she hardly knew.

"It is very difficult to judge accurately in such matters. You see it's impossible to deny that they're passionately fond of each other, and you mustn't judge of the chances of a marriage by the way it came about, you know."

"No," said Clarence, interested, "marriage is an odd thing."

"Well," said Ella brusquely, "we must be getting back now."

"Won't you wait till the yacht's out of sight ?"

Ella stopped and looked out to sea again, but she dug the end of her sunshade into the ground with nervous impatience.

"I'm so sorry it's all over ; we've had such a jolly time getting it all ready, haven't we ?" said he sentimentally.

"Oh, yes, well enough," she answered rather crossly,

feeling herself an unpleasant void at the heart which she feared might lead to some foolish exhibition of weakness.

"It was an interest in life, wasn't it?"

"Oh, yes, but there are plenty more left."

"For you, yes, because you're so good."

"Nonsense, I'm no better than you might be if you liked. It was your money that did most of it, remember. I assure you I don't forget the obligation."

"Now, Ella, don't be ridiculous. What do I care about the miserable money?"

"You'd care a great deal, if you were wise. A rich man who makes himself comparatively poor by the good things he does with his money is a fine fellow."

Clarence cleared his throat two or three times, and began to shake violently.

"Do you—do you think, Ella," he began at last huskily, "that you'd ever—care to—care to—make a fine fellow—of me?"

Ella turned sharply about and faced him.

"Can't you do it for yourself?" she asked loftily.

Clarence shook his head.

"Now you know I can't," he pleaded gently. Then, as she made no answer, he looked out to sea again, and saw that the *Scheherazade* was dwindling to a little grey point on the horizon. "Now I'll give you till the yacht is out of sight to make up your mind," said he.

Then they both looked at the vanishing speck. The moments passed, and neither spoke, though they could hear and almost feel the beating of each other's heart, and though each felt the silence to be desperately disconcerting.

"It's gone!" said he.

"No, it isn't!" cried she.

Both were growing intensely excited. Ella opened her eyes wider and wider, and strained them to the utmost. Clarence tried to speak, but she stopped him by thrusting out her hand right in front of him, holding her breath. He looked down at it for a couple of seconds, and then ventured to take it very gently in his right hand, and to put his left on her shoulder. When he had remained in this position for a few moments, she drew a long breath, and blinked her eyes violently.

"Don't cry," said Clarence soothingly, and he stooped and kissed her.

"I haven't answered you," she objected, raising her shoulder pettishly.

"Never mind that now. Let me comfort you, and you shall answer me by and by."

But Ella still looked persistently out to sea.

"The yacht's quite gone now," she said in a disconsolate voice, "and with it your twenty thousand pounds. I suppose, from a strictly business point of view, I owe you some compensation."

"Well, twenty thou is twenty thou," said Clarence, whose spirits were rising.

Ella raised her hand to her chin reflectively, a little beam of mischief coming into her eyes.

"On the whole," she said at last musingly, making no further objection to the encroachments of her companion's arm, "considering that I'm the ugly duckling of the family, perhaps I might have made a worse bargain! And to tell you the truth, Clarence," she added presently in a gentler voice, with a touch of shyness, when he had made her seal the contract with a kiss for each thousand, "if you had gone your way and I had gone mine after the way you behaved over that yacht, I—I should have missed you awfully!"

The sun was growing hot over the land and over the sea, and a dim white haze seemed to soften the line between blue sky and blue ocean, as they stood still side by side under the tower of old Maker Church, savouring of the strange sweetness of having crowned an old romance and laid the foundation of a new one with the fitting up of the yacht *Scheherazade*.

Away over the quiet sea the little yacht steamed, the red-gold evening sunlight bathing her decks and cresting with jewels each tiny wave in her track. Under the silken canopy of the little pavilion George was still sitting, with Nouna curled up asleep by his side; while the freshening breeze, which rustled in the heavily fringed curtains, blew straight in his face, bringing health and hope with its eager kiss, and sweeping away like noxious vapours the dark memories of the bygone winter. Ambition was stirring again within him, and a craving for hard work, that his faults and follies in the past might be atoned for by worthy achievement in the future. Lost in thought, he had for a

moment forgotten the present, when a slight movement of her right arm, which lay across his own, brought his sleeping wife again to his recollection. Bending down with a softened expression in his eyes, he looked long at the tiny face, the sweeping black eye-lashes, and the full red lips, the mutinous curves of which gave him a warning he scarcely needed that, when once the depression of weak health was past, it might still need all his love for her and all her love for him to keep the little wilful creature within the due bounds of dignified matronhood. The "semblance of a soul," as Rahas called it, had indeed peeped forth in her, and George Lauriston's belief that "the influence of an honest man's love was stronger than that of any mesmerist who ever hid pins," had been amply justified; but Nouna was not, and never would be, the harmless domestic creature, absorbed in household duties, whom a husband can neglect or ignore with impunity. Such as she was, however, George was more than content that she should be, and the wavering young heart which had turned to him in the dark days he was determined by every loving and wise means to keep true to him in the brighter time.

And so, with good promise of a fair future, the sun went down in a golden haze on the calm sea, as the yacht still sped on for the warm lands of orange and palm.

THE END.

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